Giant western

ALL STORIES BRAND NEW AND COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

TALLY THE LONG YEARS

A Complete Novel

By WILLIAM HOPSON

GUNS AT GALLOWS CROSSING

An Action Novel

By DWIGHT V. SWAIN

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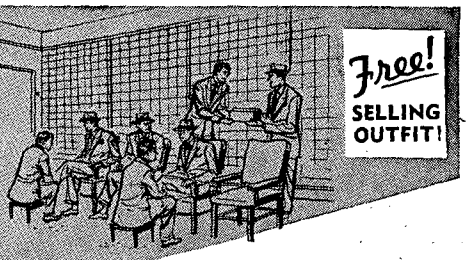

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EXTRA PROFITS SELLING CLOTHING

In addition to the *generous profit you* make on every pair of shoes, you have an opportunity to ADD TO YOUR INCOME by selling top quality Leather Jackets, Wool Shirts, Raincoats *for* men and women.

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PUT A "SHOE STORE BUSINESS" RIGHT IN YOUR POCKET . . . YOU DON'T INVEST A CENT . . . MAKE BIGGER PROFITS . . . NO STORE OVERHEAD . . . EXCLUSIVE SALES FEATURES BUILD YOUR REPEAT BUSINESS

HUGE NATIONAL ADVERTISING PROGRAM BACKS YOU

● You get the benefit of big, powerful ads in scores of magazines like Saturday Evening Post, Good Housekeeping, etc. People know Mason—are eager to get the special Personal Fitting Service we advertise for your benefit. And remember, we pay for all this advertising—it doesn't cost you a cent.

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"I have accumulated over 645 customers. The Mason line with commissions up to $3.00 a pair is really SWELL! Not only am I anxious to sell these excellent shoes because it gives me the means to a more comfortable living for my family, but also, I am my own boss with no restrictions or time to account for."

EXCLUSIVE FEATURES

Velvet-eez **AIR CUSHION** CLINCHES SALES FOR YOU!

When you sell this line, you sell FEATURES—features that no other shoe man can offer the folks in your territory—like this wonderful EXCLUSIVE Velvet-Eez AIR CUSHION that brings day-long comfort to men and women who are on their feet on hard floors and pavements from early morning to late night. The Velvet-Eez Demonstrator you'll get free in your Sales Outfit will clinch sales *for you as it has for hundreds of* other Mason Shoe Men all over the country!

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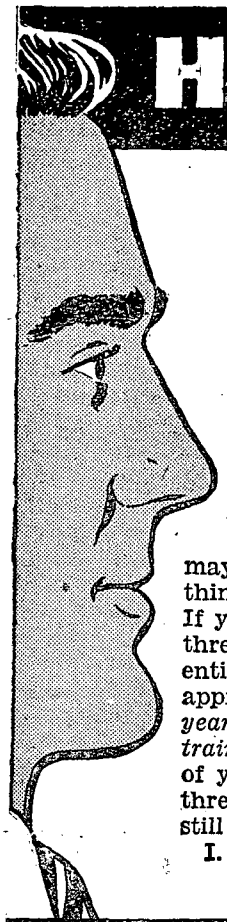

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VOL. 4, No. 1 AUGUST, 1949 Price 25c

A Full-Length Novel

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When cowboy Clay Burch is detoured to the outlaw trail, it's the start of a blazing path of plunder and banditry—but through gun thunder and hate, poison and torture, this owlhooter follows his own strict code!

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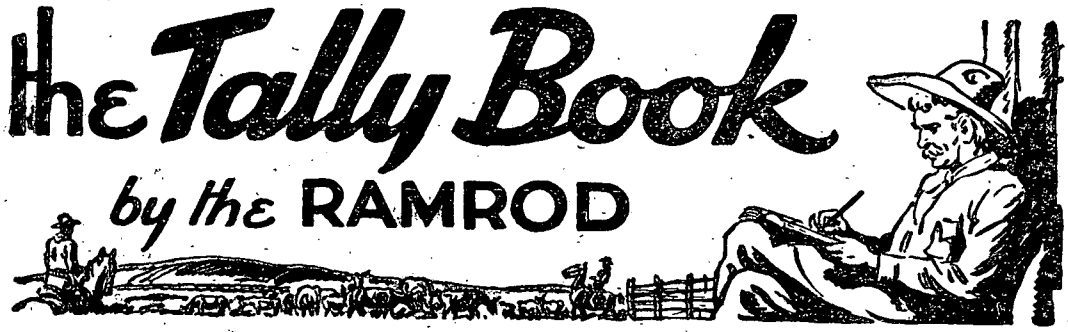
The Tally Book by the RAMROD



A DEPARTMENT WHERE ALL HANDS GET TOGETHER TO RIDE HERD ON THE WESTERN FICTION ROUNDUP

EVERY time somebody pronounces the "Wild West" really dead, it rares up and gives another kick. Like that holdup, last March, of the B & O train in real six-gun style, with the outlaws going through the passengers just as they did fifty years ago.

Of course, like so many train holdups, it was bungled. The outlaws didn't get much to begin with and the police had them caught within two or three days. Which shows that it is getting tougher and tougher all the time to indulge in a mite o' larceny, what with modern communications and better sheriffin' all around.

The Other End of the Gun

Fact, it's a bad bet at any time and it was a bad bet fifty years ago as anybody knows who's read Al Jenning's story of his life as an outlaw and train robber. If you stumble across a book of O. Henry's short stories you look that one up. It's called HOLDING UP A TRAIN and it gives a plumb good picture of what things look like to the man on the other side of the gun.

Most of all it tells the story you've heard about a lot of other criminal occupations—it just don't pay. Used to be a cartoon detective in the papers when I was a mite younger, name of Dinky Dinkerton and his slogan was "Crime don't pay well." Which is kind of cute at that.

Well, all this was started by me seeing that newspaper story of the train holdup and noticing that it was done in real Wild West style. Which led to the remark that the Old Wild West still had a kick or two left in her. But it doesn't really get up closer to the main thing I wanted to tell you about, which was the stories we got corralled for you in our next issue.

A New Mayo Novel

You folks have made such a fuss over the Kilkenny stories by Jim Mayo and been yelling so loud for more Mayo stories that we rustled right out and rounded up a new one for you. This one is called THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON, and folks—she's a novel you won't be able to forget!

Remember how Zane Grey's LONE STAR RANGER hit you when you were a kid? How you closed the book with your eyes shining and you said to yourself, "Boy, there was a *man!* And there was a *story!*" That's the way this one will affect you. It'll make you want to pick right up and get out there among the big clean mountains and the high blue sky and the stars that blaze at night and the winds that wash you clean of all your little troubles and worries. It's that kind of story.

And has it got excitement? Well, the hero, Mike Bastian, is a boy who has been adopted by an outlaw leader. He's been raised like an Indian, deep in the wilderness, a master of woodcraft, a wizard with a gun. He's been coached and drilled to take over when Ben Curry, his outlaw foster-father, sends for him. And Mike Bastian, who knows nothing of law, but is loyal to the man who befriended him, goes to answer that call.

As old Roundy, the outlaw who trained him, puts it:

"Think it over first, kid. Right now you're an honest man. You're clean as a whistle. Once you become an outlaw, a lot of things will change. You'll have to kill, don't forget

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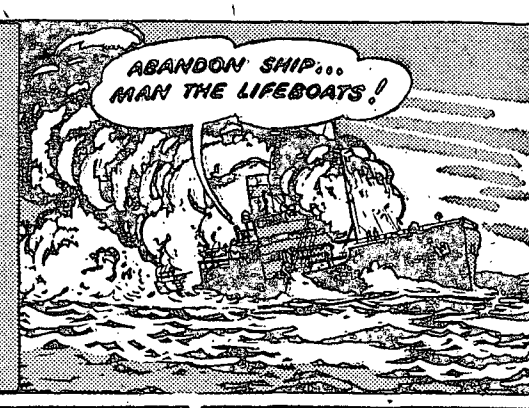
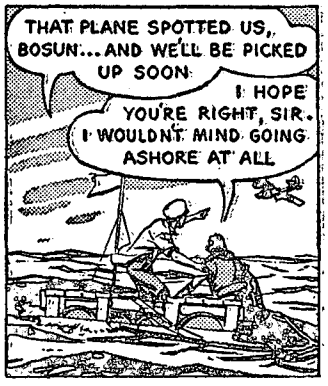
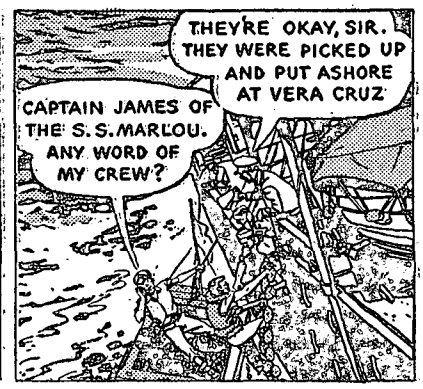
FIRE AT SEA

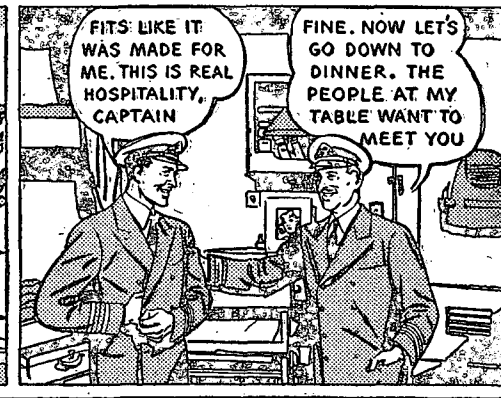
has lucky ending for Captain Jim!







THIS MAKES ME FEEL GREAT. WHAT KIND OF A BLADE HAVE YOU HERE?
A THIN GILLETTE. THAT BLADE CERTAINLY HAS WHAT IT TAKES TO SHAVE TOUGH WHISKERS QUICKLY AND EASILY


FITS LIKE IT WAS MADE FOR ME. THIS IS REAL HOSPITALITY, CAPTAIN
FINE. NOW LET'S GO DOWN TO DINNER. THE PEOPLE AT MY TABLE WANT TO MEET YOU

FOR SHAVES THAT GIVE YOU A LIFT AND MAKE YOU LOOK YOUR BEST, USE THIN GILLETTES. THEY'RE SHARPER AND LONGER LASTING THAN OTHER LOW-PRICE BLADES AND PROTECT YOU FROM THE IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. BUY THEM IN THE CONVENIENT NEW 10-BLADE PACKAGE.
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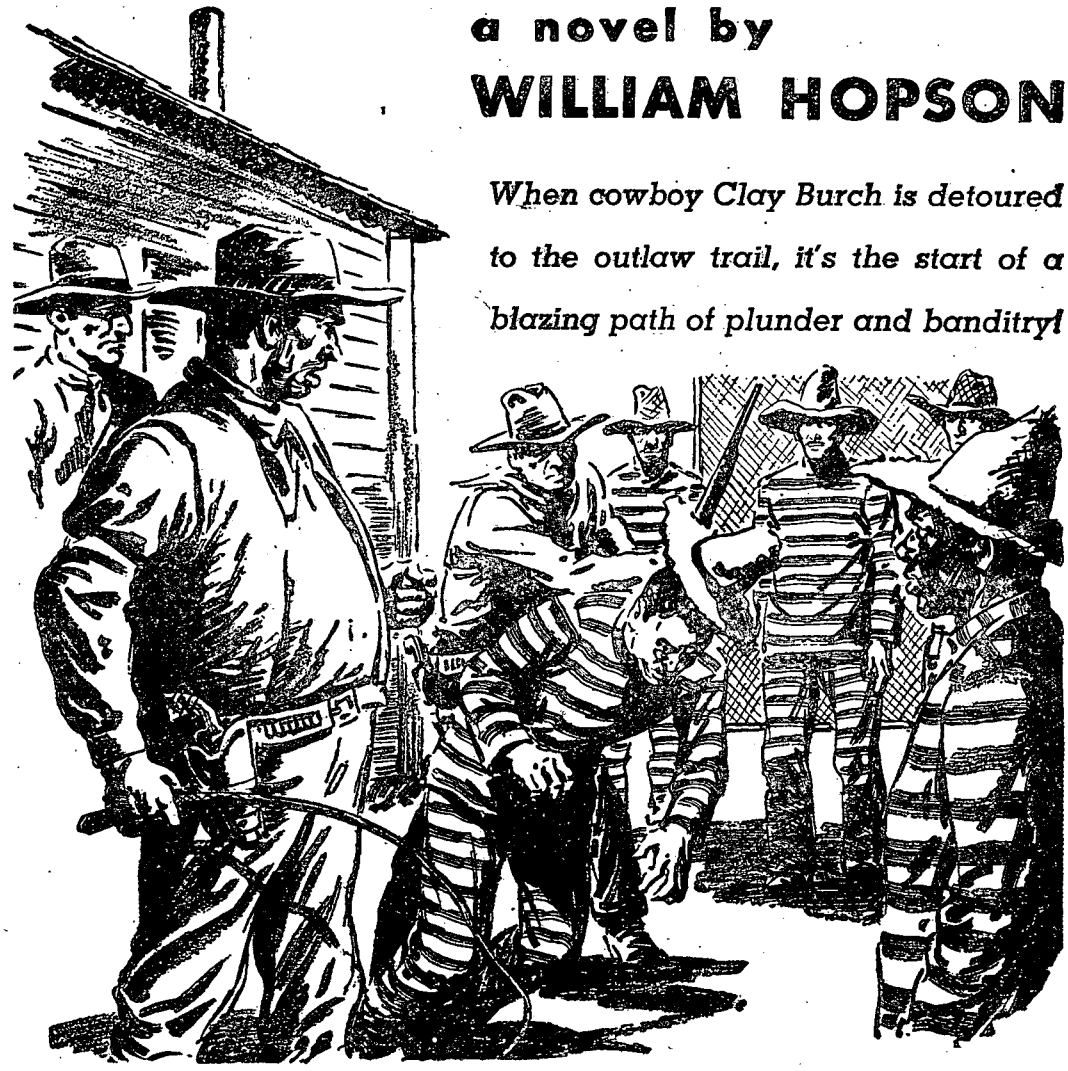
a novel by

WILLIAM HOPSON

When cowboy Clay Burch is detoured to the outlaw trail, it's the start of a blazing path of plunder and banditry!



tally the LONG years

I

HE came back to the ranch shortly before sundown, riding a mud spattered horse that was as tired as he was. His boots and chaps, and even his saddle, were smeared with reddish mud. His lariat, coiled alongside the saddle horn, was dried and stiff; this from pulling bogged down calves out of waterholes. Calves and cows too. You went in, wading in mud up to your knees, and got a lariat around their horns, and dragged them out. Then, the moment the fool cows were up on hard ground, they promptly went on the prod and charged you, trying to hook out your innards.

"Clay Burch, forty-dollar-a-month

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cow puncher," he grunted to himself, and swung down to open the corral gate. He led his tired horse over to the trough in the middle of the corral and began to unsaddle while it drank thirstily.

The ranch was located among the cottonwoods by Gravel Creek. The drought had been bad for two years, but the trickle of water still was enough to flow into the corrals. Bradley, the owner, was still holding out. His orders to his five punchers had been direct: keep riding the waterholes, pull them out of the bogs, and pray for rain.

Clay dumped his saddle on the ground and then slipped the headstall off the horse's head. He first took his lariat from where it was coiled by the fork and immersed the coils into the waters of the horse trough, washing away the mud. That done he removed his chaps and reached up into a rack beside the horse trough and brought down a brush from among the curry combs there. He scrubbed the mud from his chaps, hung the lariat on top of the fence to dry, and took off his boots, sitting on the edge of the wooden trough. He removed his wet, muddy socks and washed his feet in the waters of the horse trough, wringing out the socks. He sloshed water out of his boots, wondering how he could get them on again before they dried.

And he was hoping for rain. He knew what Bradley was going through, for Clay wanted to become a cowman himself. There was a chance to buy a small spread—over north of Bradley's place—owned by a man named Ed Hert who wanted to sell and get out. Clay had talked over the possibilities of buying

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the place, sitting with his father and mother in the kitchen of their home in town. But the elder Burch, owning three buildings in town, was mortgaged to the hilt to Lon Burton, the local banker, and couldn't sell out right now to furnish the capital Hert wanted in cash.

Kitty, the prettiest school teacher the Llanos Oros—the Gold Plains—country of Texas had ever seen.

If only the rains would come.

He tried on a boot, found the wet leather wouldn't yield, and went toward the bunkhouse in his bare feet, stepping

Clay saw the ball of fire made by the buildings his father had sacrificed so much to build (CHAP. IV)

tenderly. He saw a horse come pounding down the lane to the big ranchhouse and went on in to get some dry socks. The other men hadn't come in yet.

Clay finished washing his other foot and began to dry it with his bandanna, thinking that he wanted that place more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. Kitty was in town waiting for him;

CLAY was slipping on one of the wet boots over a dry sock when he heard the footsteps and saw Bradley, the owner, in the doorway of the bunkhouse. With him was a man, Joe Owens, owner of the local livery stable in town.

He saw in their faces that something unusual was up, and he rose.

"Hello, Brad," he said to the boss. "I just got in from pulling bogged down stuff out of mudholes all day long. If we don't get some rain soon you'd better fence those waterholes on the north

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range or get some scrapers in there to scoop out that soft mud. Brad, we've got to do something. Looks like all we do any more is pull bogged down cows and calves out of mudholes."

"I know, Clay," the rancher said awkwardly. "I guess we'll make out. But Joe here just blowed in from town. Clay, boy, I'm afraid he's got some bad news for you."

"What?" Clay asked the liveryman.

"Well, Clay, it's like this," began the liveryman awkwardly. "I—uh—don't exactly know how to tell you, but I expect you'd better saddle a fresh hoss and come into town. You—uh—see, Colter, the banker from Cedar City come over today to see Burton at the bank in town. Seems he had a buyer for them buildings of your dad's and the two of 'em had loaned the money for the mortgage. Your dad couldn't pay so they sort of foreclosed."

Clay felt sick inside. His father had worked for years to accumulate enough money to buy that property. Drought had taken away the tenants, men who had failed in business and left the buildings vacant.

He said, "That was a dirty trick. Dad was keeping up the interest on the mortgages. That's what they're in business for—to loan money; and he was paying them a high rate of interest. They didn't have to foreclose."

"I know," the liveryman went on awkwardly. "You don't have to tell me how greedy Burton is. He near broke me before I got my loan paid off from borrowing to start my livery. It amounted to about forty per cent by the time I got through."

Clay finished with the other boot, his lips tight.

"Well," he said, "I don't see what I can do, Joe. If Dad's lost the property, he's just lost it, that's all. I got some money saved up, but not in Burton's bank. I never trusted him. I even warned Dad against him. So I'll just have to take care of him and mother from my wages. They can make out. He's too old and crippled up to go to work again."

"That's just the trouble, Clay," Owens got out uncomfortably. "It's why you better come in town."

"What is it?" Clay rapped out at him.

"Clay, I sure hate to tell you this, but it's why I come. Your dad went home from talking to Burton and Colter and took out his old six-shooter and shot himself. He's dead, Clay."

"I see," Clay said in a strangely quiet way, unaware that his face was almost white now. "He killed himself because a couple of money grubbers got their hooks into him and then sunk 'em deep." He turned to the ranchman. "Brad, I'm pulling my time. I'm quitting. I want to borrow a horse to go into town."

"All right, Clay. Of course you can have a hoss. Any on the place. But look here, boy, don't you go doing anything foolish. You never was a hothead. You allus had a level head on you, and I want you to keep it. How about waiting for a few days and coming back to the ranch? You got a job here as long as you want it."

"Thanks, but I'm pulling stakes."

He went to his bunk and hauled out the tarp bedroll, rolling it up tightly and lashing it with savage jerks of the cotton rope. He got his warbag from beneath the bed and started tossing in shaving outfit and other things from the shelf above the bunk.

Joe said, "Well, I'd better be gettin' on back to town. I'm shore sorry, Clay."

"Thanks. Drop by the house and tell mother I'll be in in a little while, soon as I finish packing."

Owens left and Clay went out to the corrals. A couple of the other riders had come in and were unsaddling. Another was jogging down the slope from the west. They were all mud spattered. It had been a tough week. Clay went to the manger inside the stable and dug down, removing a tin can with his savings in it. He had felt the money to be safer there than in the bank. He came out of the corral leading a fresh horse and walked over to the bunkhouse again. When he came out with his tarp and warbag, Bradley silently handed him thirty dollars.

"You can leave the horse at the livery in town, Clay," the rancher said. "One of the boys can pick it up. But I don't want 'em to pick it up. You go in and take care of things and tell your Ma that me and the missus will be in to the funeral. If they need some help diggin' the grave, I'll send in a couple of the boys. But I want you back out here in a week, son. Hard work is the best cure in the world for troubles, and it keeps a young feller's mind from thinking the wrong thing. You wouldn't have any ideas about bustin' that bank with a six-shooter and a canvas sack, would you?"

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QUICKLY Clay looked at him, his eyes colder than they had ever been in his life. "You hit it right on the head, Brad. That's exactly what I'm going to do. I'm going to do the people of this country a favor by cracking that bank wide open. Day after tomorrow at closing time. And I'll shoot Burton's head off if he makes a move to try to stop me."

Something like a sigh went out of the rancher's lungs. He wagged his big shaggy head from side to side. "Don't do it, boy," he whispered hoarsely. "Don't do it, Clay. You've been more like a son to me since you went to work on this ranch six year ago when you were only seventeen. The only reason you ain't foreman is because old Joe Crepps is just too old and ornery to die and let you have his job. You know what this means, boy: you're an outlaw, an enemy of Clark. Clark's a good sheriff, boy; a little old and wheezy, but he's known you since you were in knee britches. Many's the night him and me played poker with your dad in yore house, as you well remember. He thought the world of your folks and he thinks you're the salt of the earth. So I'm begging you again, boy—don't do it!"

Clay had the tarp and warbag lashed high back of the cantle. He looked at the rancher. "You're not telling anybody what I plan to do, Brad?" he asked.

Bradley shook his head. "No, son, because I don't want to see you ride up to that bank and get riddled with shotguns and Winchesters. And that's what Bill Clark would do, because he's an honest sheriff. I hear Burton has his bank insured after he got held up three year ago. If you do this fool thing, at least yore friends and neighbors won't be losing any money. I'm thankful for that, but it makes me sick all over. It almost makes my legs tremble, thinking of yore mother and Kitty. It means you've got to give up yore home and Kitty, everything you've worked for, to ride the dim trails as a hunted man. It means a good man's life ruined because of a rat. It ain't worth it, Clay."

"I'll send for mother and Kitty later. There's nothing left for me here any more, Brad, now that dad's gone. I couldn't walk down the street without knowing that on that same boardwalk he's walked a thousand times. I couldn't pass those three little false-fronted buildings that represented his life's savings without choking up. I couldn't look at that Burton's sneering face without wanting to throw a gun on him. I've never killed a man in my life, and I'm not going to start at this time. But Burton's going to pay for this crooked deal."

Two other punchers were strolling toward the bunkhouse to wash up before supper. Clay shook hands with the rancher and swung his right leg up high over the tarp and warbag. He rode down the lane, eastward toward town four miles away, and he knew that the long years with Bradley were ended.

He turned his face to the fore again, and this time he did not look back.

II

EDDIE McCARTHY, slim, blond, good-looking young reporter on the Llanos Oros *Bugle*, came back from the undertaking parlor where the body of John Burch lay and entered the office where old man Powers, owner and editor, was busy at his desk. Powers was reading several sheets of fine handwriting on foolscap paper. It was past dusk now, past the supper hour, but from the press room behind the office came the sounds of the two printers at work. The weekly *Bugle* was going to press as soon as the printers finished setting up the story of John Burch's suicide and the column, written by Eddie, that Powers now was editing with savage rumbles.

He turned angrily and glared, pointing an index finger at the paper in his hands.

"I just want you to tell me," he said trying to control his voice. "I just want to hear it from your own lips. Did you write this?"

Eddie looked at him and grinned. He had been born in upper New York state of a well-to-do family and spent two years at Harvard University, studying English and French literature, while sending home glowing reports to his parents of his high marks in the (sic) Law Course. By the time his parents discovered the deception Eddie was both tired of Harvard and was writing satirical stories for the newspapers about such subjects as what kind of underwear the Dean wore during summers, why should a man spend four years at Harvard when he could learn all the courses in one, and the love lives

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of the kippered herrings his English professor liked for breakfast.

Needless to say, he was expelled by the Dean and ordered home by his outraged parents. Eddie's answer to the latter was to turn his footsteps the opposite direction and head west. He worked on various newspapers along the way, writing scintillating stories, but his restlessness soon sent him on again.

He had come into Llanos Oros on the local stage with a three days collection of dirt and whiskers on his handsome face. Powers had promptly put him to work and Eddie had done a good job. His weekly column in the paper brought grins—some of them wry—but pepped up the news. He could put more news into a good dog fight—and Eddie would go into much detail on what the dogs said to each other before they tangled with fang and claw—than Powers could write about a bank holdup.

"Sure, I wrote it," Eddie McCarthy grinned blandly at his employer. "Have't you become familiar with my handwriting after three months?"

"It's an outrage, that's what it is," sputtered Powers angrily. "Oh, you did your usual good job in writing about poor Burch's life and all that, but you've just as good as accused Burton and Colter of the murder of the old man."

"I know it," Eddie replied calmly. "I was afraid you'd miss the point. That's what it was: murder."

"We can't print that part of it and you know it. I won't allow any such insinuations against such a prominent citizen. And while we're on the subject, you're going to tone down this column a bit, young man. That one about Mrs. Johnson at the tea party last week wearing a smock has the whole town laughing. Hell, she can't help it if she's about ready to have a baby."

"Nope," Eddie replied pleasantly, "because it's what is known as an Act of God. Those acts keep right on happening with regularity all over the world and I don't foresee any change coming in the immediate future. Mrs. Johnson *was* at the party and she *did* wear a loose smock to cover up what—shall we say—is a slight increase in size and weight."

Powers' pencil slashed through several paragraphs of t[illegible]ng on the foolscap. He straightened and handed Eddie the sheets. "All right, young man, I've cut out the part about Burton and Colter being responsible, through greed, for John Burch's death. You rewrite it and hurry it up so we can get to press."

"*You* rewrite and hurry it up if you want to get to press," Eddie answered calmly.

Powers had risen to his feet. "You're fired!" he shouted.

"Nope!" Eddie grinned thinly. "I just quit while your pencil was slashing out those paragraphs about that couple of precious scoundrels. I was getting restless and bored with you and this broken-down paper anyhow. 'Mrs and Mrs. Fumdiddle visited in Cedar City with Mrs and Mrs Fluglebutts Wednesday. They chewed tea, drank crackers, and talked about the drought.' You owe me a week's wages. Do I get it now or do I have to sue you?"

Powers' face was livid as he reached into the cash drawer and brought out a ten-dollar gold coin and five silver dollars. Eddie's salary as star reporter and part editor was fifteen dollars a week, big money for such a paper.

He pocketed the money and strolled out, humming softly; a tall, slim figure in natty suit and high heeled boots. Eddie had taken to riding with the ease of a man born to the saddle, and he spent every available moment away from town with Clay Burch, learning the cow business.

"I might decide to have the Governor set me up in business some day," he had informed Clay with a grin. "He's got more money than he knows what to do with."

AIMLESSLY Eddie went on down the street, deciding that he needed a drink. His drinking usually was limited to a couple of beers a week and no more. He knew that Clay didn't drink. The two of them usually spent part of Clay's time in town, playing checkers in the Owl Saloon and bedevilling the bartender. The harassed dispenser of liquids had reached a point where he dreaded to see the two come in.

Sheriff Bill Clark came down the street and stopped as the two men came face to face.

"'Lo, Bill," Eddie greeted. "I know you don't drink, but you're going in the Owl and have a beer with me just this once. It's my tribute to an honest officer, the Hope of the People, the Inspirer of Courage, the Paragon of Civic Virtue—"

"Shut it off," interrupted the sheriff.

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"You'll have me snapping my suspenders an' stickin' out my chest. If I could spout them fancy words like you can—I only went to the third grade in school—I'd be rich!"

"You'd be right here snoring in your office four hours every afternoon, same as you've done for fifteen years. But come along to the Owl for that beer. I'm celebrating."

Clark fell in beside him, a heavy, good-natured man who was more efficient than he looked.

"What are you celebrating, you young scamp?" he demanded.

"I just got fired," Eddie McCarthy grinned.

"The devil! How come?"

"Because I wrote in my column that Burton and Colter are responsible for John Burch's suicide. I didn't exactly call it murder. I merely hinted of the fact that it *was* legalized murder."

"It's tough, all right," Clark said. "I sent Owens out from the livery to tell Clay at the ranch. They call me a hardened old lawman, but they'll never know how I felt goin' into the house and helping to remove John's body. He was shore a mess. He stuck the barrel of that forty-four right into his mouth, pointed it upward, and pulled the trigger. It very near blew off the top of his fool head."

They pushed inside the swinging doors and saw Burton and Colter drinking brandy from small pony glasses.

The sheriff greeted them: "Hello, Burt. Howdy, John. How's things in Cedar City?"

Colter was around forty, and quite massively built for a banker; clean shaven and well dressed.

"About the same, Bill," he said. "We're growing fast. Why don't you ever come over and see us instead of just leaving a deputy over there? We've a lot of votes, you old scalawag."

"No crime over there, so why should I bother?" answered the sheriff. His face grew serious. "Sure too bad about Burch, wasn't it?"

"Terrible," murmured Colter. "But I understand he's been ill for a long time, and you can never account for the working of a man's mind when he's ill. I feel quite badly about it."

"Yea," sneered Eddie. "I know how bad you two feel about it. You got three more buildings to make you feel bad. And I got fired a few minutes ago for

"Me—Clay," called the horseman's voice in answer (CHAP. VIII)

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writing that Burch didn't commit suicide, that you two murdered him. You take these people's money and lend it out at usurious rates, and when they can't pay, you ruin them."

Bill Clark wheeled and laid a hand on Eddie's shoulder. "Hold it, boy," he said sharply. "That kind of talk don't help matters a bit. He's dead and cain't be brought back to life. Let's have that beer and forget about it."

"Thanks, Bill, but I got a bad taste in my mouth all of a sudden. I feel like I want to go outside and puke off the boardwalk. There's a bad smell in here and my stomach is all upset. I'll have the beer with you some other time."

He went out and his footsteps turned toward the edge of town. He went down a side street and came to a small, comfortable looking frame house with one lighted front window. From out back came the sound of a horse coming at a walk, and Eddie went around through the darkness toward the tiny barbed wire pen where John Burch had kept a gentle old saddle pony. The rider came up.

"Clay?" Eddie asked.

"That you Eddie? Yea, it's me."

He swung down and Eddie saw him untieing his warbag and tarp bedroll from back of the saddle. "Looks like you're not returning to the ranch," Eddie observed.

"That's right Eddie," Clay answered cryptically. "I'm out of a job."

"So am I," was the reply. "I got fired for writing that Burton and Colter actually murdered your father. Words are sort of useless at times like these, so I won't say them, Clay. He was a good man."

"Were you here when it happened?"

"No, I was down at Doc Parth's place to find out how bad that new KR rider was injured this afternoon. Horse fell down a bank and rolled over on him. First I knew about it was when a kid came running. I came back here and took your mother over to one of the neighbors until Clark could get some men and take him down to the undertaking parlor."

CLAY was unsaddling. He dumped his saddle on the ground, opened the wire gate and led the horse inside, stripping off the headstall.

"I want to see him," he said.

"Don't, Clay. You'd better remember him as you saw him the last time you were in town from the ranch."

"I want to see him."

"Clay, we're friends—we ought to be with me renting a room from your mother—and I'll let you have it straight. He stuck the gun muzzle up against the roof of his mouth. You owe it to your mother to be with her."

He picked up the tarp bedroll and warbag. Clay slung his saddle over his shoulder and carried the bridle and the two of them went toward the back of the house. They went in through the kitchen and into Eddie's room. Clay slept with him here when he was staying overnight in town. Mrs. Burch had laughingly called the two of them, "both my sons."

Mrs. Burch was over with one of the neighbor women, and somehow Clay was a little glad. He dreaded the meeting in the face of tragedy. He sat down on the edge of the bed and rolled a cigarette, and Eddie seated himself beside him and reached for the tobacco sack.

He said, "So you quit at the ranch?"

Clay Burch nodded.

"What are you going to do?"

"Square up with Burton," Clay said tonelessly.

"Clay, you can't do that! It'd be murder, and you're not the kind of a man who'll commit murder. Burton doesn't pack a gun. He never packed one in his life, and wouldn't know how to shoot it if he did. You can't do it, Clay."

"I'm not going to kill him. That would be too easy. I'm going to hit him harder than that."

"How?"

"Eddie, I'm going to stick up his bank the day after tomorrow. In the afternoon just at closing time. I'm going to clean him out."

Eddie whistled and finished rolling the cigarette. He started to put it in his pocket, remembered, and handed back the sack and papers.

"No," he said in an odd tone of voice. "You aren't going to do anything of the kind. *We* are going to pull that holdup."

"Better think it over," Clay warned. "It means I'll have to run for it. I'll have to burn the breeze over into New Mexico Territory and probably on into Arizona. If we get caught, you know what it means. They've got a tough prison system here in Texas."

"I always wanted to know how I'd

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feel sticking up a bank, Clay." Eddie grinned. "And that paint pony of mine can outrun anything in this country. But what about your mother and Kitty? Thought about that?"

"I'll send for them after I'm settled some place else," was the stony reply.

"All right, boy. But if I had a girl like Kitty, I'd go right out and get the world by the tail and drag it back and put it right in her lap. I've never seen anything back East as pretty as she is. And, just in case you don't know it, the last time she was over in Cedar City at a meeting of the school supervisors Colter tried to get her to have supper with him. He's got his eye on her. I almost wanted to print it in the paper to see how red his face would get. I didn't because of Kitty."

Footsteps sounded on the front porch and the two men got up.

"There's Mother now," Clay said and ground out his cigarette on the floor with a boot heel.

III

WALKING slowly, Clay went into the front room, followed by Eddie, as three women came in; his mother, Kitty Renner, and Mrs. Johnson—who still wore her smock.

Mrs. Burch was in her forties and still a handsome woman, who had married a man twenty years her senior. Clay towered over her as he took her in his arms. She was dry-eyed now.

"It's all right, Mom," he said. "They sent word to the ranch. I'll take care of everything."

"Of course it's all right," his mother answered. "We'll get by. I'm going to work in the millinery shop next week—after everything is over."

Clay released her and looked at Kitty. "How are you, Kitty? Howdy, Mrs. Johnson."

"Clay, I'm sorry," Kitty answered simply. "There isn't anything more I can say."

She was nineteen, four years younger than Clay and Eddie McCarthy, with clear blue eyes and blonde hair the color and texture of Clay's. They had been "keeping company" for three months. It was pretty well understood around town that one of these days they would get married. Clay had wanted to hold it off until he could help his father clear the three buildings, sell them, and buy that small ranch. That was why they had not married.

Mrs. Johnson realized the tenseness in the room and tried to relieve it with a joke, looking at Eddie.

"So I wore a smock, did I?" she asked. "And it was an Act of God? Shame on you, you naughty boy!"

"Just an Act of God, Mrs. Johnson," Eddie murmured. "And that *is* an attractive smock you're wearing."

She burst into laughter. "There's nothing better in the world than having children, young man. I ought to know—I've got five of them. Well, I expect I'd better be getting home. If you need me for anything, Gertrude, just call me."

"I will," said Gertrude Burch.

Clay somehow found himself outside, walking with Kitty through the night toward where she lived alone in a small house at the edge of town. They didn't speak on the way over. He smoked another cigarette, nervously, as she paced him. They went into the living room and he held matches while she lit the kerosene lamp. The place was neat and clean. She went over and sat down on the edge of the bed and beckoned to him to come.

"All right, Clay, let's have it," she said softly. "You've got an odd look in your face. You've got something in your eyes that's never been there before. I don't know what it is—what you're thinking—but I don't like it. Tell me what you're thinking."

"You know why Dad killed himself this evening," he said. "Everybody in town knows. Burton and Colter."

"Of course. There really wasn't any reason for them to take away his property. You had been using your wages to keep up the interest. But, darling, there are always two sides to any argument. They looked at it only from the standpoint of business. They could probably claim they had to protect their depositors' money by taking the property. Legally they are right, though morally they were wrong. They could have extended the mortgages. They could have given him time to borrow money on second mortgages. But that's to no avail, Clay. It's done and can't be helped. What I'm worried about is you. There's something in your face I don't like."

He sat there on the bed beside her, stonily smoking another cigarette, and told her what he and Eddie were going to do. He saw the look on her face; one of horror mingled with fear. She

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clutched him tightly in her arms and buried her face against him with her lips up close to his ear, kissing him and murmuring.

"Oh, no, no—no, Clay! Anything but that! Think what it means? It'll kill your mother."

"You just said that everybody in town knows why Dad shot himself today," he reminded her, almost harshly. "And Mom's a pretty strong person. She'll understand why I did it. Eddie and me will barrel out of here and when we get settled, I'll send for you two. We'll start off fresh over in New Mexico or Arizona. Kitty, will you wait for me?"

"You know I will. That's part of a woman's job—waiting for their men. I'll wait for you, even though I know that what you are doing is wrong. I love you that much."

"It shouldn't be long. Maybe a year to let things cool down and Clark sort of forget. Then you can resign your school and slip out quietly. Mom can follow a few months later. But you'll wait for me?" he asked again.

"Why do you ask when I've just told you?"

"I just heard that John Colter has been inviting you to eat with him. Eddie told me."

"He asked me to have supper with him while we were over in Cedar City at the meeting of the school board with the county teachers. I did it out of politeness. After all, we bank part of our school funds with him. You're not jealous, are you, darling?"

"Good heavens, no!" He laughed and kissed her. "Well, I'd better be going. We'll bury Dad tomorrow."

SHE went with him to the doorway, after blowing out the light. In the darkness he saw her white, anxious face looking up.

"Clay, promise me one thing, will you?" she whispered.

"Anything except a change of plans, Kitty."

"Don't spill any blood. You're not a killer."

"No," he said. "I'm not a killer, Kitty. And I promise you that I won't kill anybody when we bust that bank. I might have to shoot a man through the arm or leg, but I promise you that now or any other time I'll never kill a man."

He went out into the night and down the darkened street. A dog ran out, barking furiously, and Clay bent as though to pick up a clod. The cur fled and Clay went back to the house.

Eddie was propped up in bed on three pillows, smoking and reading Plato. He was in his summer underwear. Clay sat down and began to pull off his still damp boots.

"What's *that* one you're reading?" Clay asked idly.

"Plato. An old fuss budget if there ever was one. He and Mrs. Johnson wouldn't get along at all. Not with *his* ideas of love and *her* ideas about people having big families. Her husband would probably chase his ghost out of the house with a shotgun if it ever showed up. You tell Kitty?"

Clay said, "Yes," and began to strip off his socks.

"What did she say?"

"She'll wait until we get settled and can send for her and Mom. Made me promise not to kill anybody. We won't have to. Those three tellers in the bank will cower down when we throw a gun in their faces."

"Figuring on wearing a mask?"

"No," was the reply. "It wouldn't do any good. We're too well known."

He rolled into bed on the back side and tiredness came down almost at once to produce sleep. He had weird dreams that night in which he was being shot down in front of the bank by Kitty herself, and he rolled and tossed until daylight.

The next morning he went down town to the undertaking parlor. It was in the rear of the hardware store. Roy Harris, whom Clay had known for years, came forward.

"I've made all the arrangements for the funeral, Clay," he said. "Bill Clark and several more men are out digging the grave. What time do you want to bury? I thought about two o'clock this afternoon."

"I guess that'll be all right," Clay said. He had his money with him and pulled it from his pocket.

He paid for the coffin and went back to the house, and at two that afternoon he stood by his mother and Kitty, his hat off, while the minister intoned words and Burton stood by, head piously bowed. John Colter had returned to Cedar City.

Afterward Clay loaded his mother and Kitty and Eddie into the hack he had rented from Joe Owens at the liv-

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ery and returned to town. He slept badly that night and felt relieved when morning of the next day came. This was to be the day. He saw Clark, who had been to the funeral, and talked briefly, casually. Bradley hadn't said anything about his quitting his job and nobody except his mother and Kitty knew about it. For that he was glad. Clark might get suspicious.

Shortly after one o'clock that afternoon, in Llanos Oros, Clay went out to the corral, carrying saddle and bridle. Eddie had brought his horse over from the livery. It was in the small corral with saddle on. Clay got a can from the back porch and rode down town. He passed the bank on his way to Harris's

place for some kerosene and saw Bradley. He reined over and looked down.

"Howdy, Brad," he greeted. "Didn't expect you in town this time of the week."

"You know why I'm here," the rancher said, again shaking his great head from side to side. "Still going through with this crazy idea of yourn?"

"It's got to be that way, Brad," Clay said stonily. "I'd like to borrow this horse—I picked him special for the job. I'll see that you get him back some day."

"You can have the horse, son. I'll be over here watching from this side of the street, but it near makes me sick to think about it."

"And you'll be packing your gun?"

"I won't be using it, son," the rancher said. "I'm a rancher, not a lawman. But I wish you'd change your mind."

"Too late now, Brad. Well, I'll be going."

He rode around to the back of Harris's store and went through the room where his father had lain in a coffin. He bought the gallon of kerosene and rode back to the house. His mother was in the front room as he came in.

"You look as though you might be thinking of doing some traveling," she said.

He nodded at her and smiled, easily, covering the tightness in his midriff. "Eddie and me are pulling out for a little while. I sort of want to get away after what's happened. So, since we're both out of jobs, we'll travel around a bit."

He gave her the last of his money. He knew he wouldn't need it. In a matter of minutes he'd either have plenty of it—or he wouldn't have any use for money.

HE went back to his room. Eddie was stuffing the volume of Plato in a small bag, along with his shaving outfit and a few other things.

"It's time to go," Clay said.

"Let's get rolling," Eddie said.

They went out and Eddie tied the bag to his cantle. Clay slipped his repeater into the saddle scabbard beneath the left skirt. They rode toward town, Clay holding the gallon can of kerosene in the crook of one arm.

The three Burch buildings were rather small affairs, facing the street with one long false front built to the three of them. They were on a vacant corner, cat-a-corner from the bank. One had housed a saloon, the second a saddle shop, the third a small store. But times were bad and the men who had rented them went broke. The buildings lay empty and deserted as Clay swung down in back and gave Eddie the reins of his horse.

He saw Burton standing on the bank porch, watching as Clay took keys and opened the back doors. He went inside and began pouring a trickle of kerosene around the floors, up against the wall paper. He tossed aside the empty can, took a handful of matches from his pocket, and began to set fires. By the time he got into the last building smoke was boiling out around the windows and through the open back doors.

He ran out and swung up, and heard a yell. Somebody was shouting and pointing. The town came alive as men and women and children began to run. Clay and Eddie jogged over toward the bank, to where a livid-faced Burton stood on the porch. The three buildings rapidly were becoming a mass of flames and gray smoke.

"You did it! You did it!" The banker's yell was half in a scream, and he shook

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a trembling finger at Clay as he swung down and walked up on the porch, followed by Eddie.

Clay looked at him and grinned. Men were running and shouting and talking about a water bucket line; but it was obvious that it would be a waste of time. The dried pine boards were a mass of roaring flames by now.

"Yes, I did it!" Clay grinned coldly at the banker. "You should have known I wouldn't let you get away with it." He grabbed Burton by the shoulder and half flung him inside.

Then his gun was out and covering both the banker and the three surprised men back of the wire cage. Clay jerked out a canvas bag from his shirt front and handed it to Eddie.

"Have them fill it up," he ordered.

Eddie jumped around through a swinging gate and the frightened cashiers, who had but a short time before closed out his account, began to shovel out money.

"That's it," Eddie said. "I like service. How's the wife and kiddies these days, Harry? Ben, there's no reason for your hands to shake that way. I wouldn't think of pulling this trigger—unless you tried something rash. Maybe I'll come back one of these days with this money and buy old Powers' newspaper. If I do, I'll write up a nice piece about you. No, not the silver, Ben—it's too heavy. How's the fire going, Clay?" he called.

"Burning beautifully," Clay answered. "Everybody in town is crowding around. Take your time. We're in no hurry."

"You'll pay for this!" blazed Burton. "Just you wait! You'll pay plenty for this. I'll send you to the penitentiary if I have to spend the last dollar this bank has got."

"I'm already paid," Clay Burch said. "You can sign the receipt on a dead man's grave out in the cemetery. While we're at it, tell Colter in Cedar City that I'll be back to pay his bank a little visit some day. I can't tell you when. I want him to sweat blood, knowing that at any time of the day or week or month I'll be riding up to clean out his bank. How are you making out, Eddie?"

Eddie began to laugh. "Not so good. Ben's hands are trembling so bad he's having a hard time getting this paper money into the sack. It's about full, Clay. Do you think we ought to go get a couple of gunny sacks?" Eddie laughed again, the carefree sounds rolling through the bank and out into the street to be swallowed up in the crackle of the flames.

"Nope, just fill that one. Burton here will tell the insurance people it was ten times as much and collect it. Burt, the next time I come back to rob your bank you've got to give me half the insurance money you get. How about it?"

"Just—you wait," gasped out the shaking banker. "Just you—wait!"

"Don't choke. Your face is all red. Eddie, we'd better get going."

"Right away."

Eddie vaulted the low railing with a gun in one hand and the sack in the other. He sheathed his six-shooter and came toward the front of the bank, grinning, a cigar in his mouth. "One of Burton's private stock!" He chuckled. "Here's the money. There was more but we couldn't be hogs. We'll save some for the next time."

IV

AS Clay took the sack, his eyes were still on the tellers in case they might try for hidden weapons. He still had Burton covered with his gun.

"Go on out and get the reins of my horse," he ordered Eddie. "I'll be right with you."

Eddie sauntered out onto the bank porch and leisurely mounted. He bent and picked up the reins of the other horse. Then Clay came through the doorway, tied the sack to the saddle horn, and lifted the reins. He saw the ball of fire made by the three buildings his father had sacrificed so much to build. He saw Sheriff Bill Clark, puffing after a run from his office. He saw Bradley across the street.

"So long, Brad!" Clay called. "They don't make 'em any finer than you!"

Then they jogged down the street, broke into a gallop, and Eddie was laughing hard as they left the town behind.

"And to think," he whooped, "that I've been *working* for a living! Easiest thing I ever saw. New Mexico, here we come!"

They loped and trotted their mounts by turns, always looking back. Clay tried to put from his mind what his mother, what Kitty was thinking. He knew it would be a terrible blow to his

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Borden spun, and saw the levelled rifles. "Burch," he husked. "How—where—did yuh come from?"
(CHAP. XVI)

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mother; but he knew that she would understand. It was his way of squaring up for the rotten deal that had been pulled on his father.

He knew deep down inside of him that it wasn't right; that he had broken the laws of the state. His doing wrong couldn't right another. His holding up Burton's bank wouldn't bring back his father.

Clay shrugged, putting aside such gloomy thoughts, and rode on. He would write his mother in care of Joe Owens, the liveryman, and explain. Joe would see that she got the letter.

There was no sign of pursuit that afternoon. The town had been caught too flat-footed. It would have taken Clark an hour to organize a posse of citizens and get rolling. He would probably follow and try to trail them, sending word on ahead if he got into a town that had a telegraph station.

They covered nearly fifty miles by midnight that night, taking time out to double back and leave false trails. At each arroyo they crossed, where the sand left deep tracks of their horses' hooves, they split, riding opposite directions for a mile or two and then joining up later miles away. Late in the evening, just as the sun was going down, they came to a small creek and were careful to ride into it on an angle, heading north. They kept right on up it, wading their horses.

"They'll think we doubled back south, and will take that direction," Clay explained.

By midnight their played out horses could go no further. They stumbled into a small waterhole surrounded by a thick growth of mesquites and made camp. Clay let the horses drink thirstily. He gave them a good rub down while Eddie built a tiny fire. Clay took a small sack of grain from back of his cantle and fed them, after which he staked them out on lariats to graze. He came back to the fire and Eddie looked up from over the pot of coffee and wiped at the smoke burning his eyes. They were traveling light. No bedrolls, no big supply of food.

Clay sat down wearily.

"It's about ready," Eddie said. "Cold biscuits, jerky beef, and coffee. Ah, the happy, carefree life of a bank robber! Life in the open, short working hours, good pay, solid future. Well, Clay, looks like we made it."

"It looks like we made it," Clay Burch said.

They ate hungrily. They hadn't eaten since noon, nearly twelve hours, and Clay hadn't had much of an appetite despite his mother's cooking. He almost wolfed the food, his eyes unconsciously going to the two exhausted horses. They were going to be tired and stiff in the morning.

He gulped the last of his coffee and picked up the canvas sack.

"How much do you figure?" he asked Eddie.

"Difficult to say. My guess is around five to six thousand."

"Let's count it."

He spread out his damp saddle blanket and dumped the contents of the sack out into the light of the fire. Mostly paper money, some gold.

"There was plenty more in there but it was in coin," Eddie said. "Anyhow, it wasn't the money but the principle of the thing—hey, that's a joke! The principle of getting money."

They counted out the spoils: thirty-two hundred dollars. Sixteen hundred apiece. For sixteen hundred dollars each they had become men outside the law; wanted men; with probably a reward. For Clay knew Burton. He was a vindictive man.

"I'll bet that Burt is tearing his hair right now," Eddie grinned. "And I'll bet that Colter already has word of the holdup and is sleeping uneasy tonight. What's our next move, Clay?"

It was accepted that he was the leader.

"Get on over into New Mexico for awhile and lay low," Clay said. "Keep out of sight and let things cool down."

"And then?"

CLAY looked at him, and the surprising thought flashed through his mind that he hadn't planned beyond this, other than to get his mother and Kitty to come to him.

"I'll write a letter to Joe and see how things are going back home," Clay answered.

They rolled into "bed" on top of their damp saddle blankets and slept through until after the sun was up. While Eddie got breakfast which consisted of black coffee, more jerky, and the last of the cold biscuits, Clay Burch brought the horses to the hole. He watered them, fed them the last of the grain, and rubbed them down.

They got under way and headed west

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again, still following a course that was slightly south. At noon that day they invaded the horse pasture of a small ranch and roped out two fresh mounts. They left the two tired, stiff-jointed horses that had brought them nearly seventy-five miles, with a note to the owner tied in the mane of one of the discarded mounts. With it were enough gold backs to pay for the new horses.

It might be two or three days before the note was discovered, and Clay knew that would give them plenty of time.

Late that afternoon they dropped in to a small town, making certain beforehand that it had no telegraph facilities. It was just another cow town.

"I'm going over to the livery to get some grain for the horses," Clay said. "You go straight to the store and take down your slicker roll. Go inside and buy what you think we'll need for a few more days. Then we'll get out of town and make camp and go to bed."

"Why not stay in this one horse hotel? Ah, the happy life of a bandit! What I wouldn't give just to take a good bath and roll between the sheets and sleep for a week. I'm so stiff my joints creak when I walk."

"Don't flash any of those bigger gold backs," Clay warned. "Use your smaller change. I'll be back in a few minutes. Then we'll roll. We can't risk it, Eddie."

The name of the town was Roseville, though just why it had been given such a cognomen nobody knew. There hadn't been a rose grown in the place during the memory of the earliest inhabitants. It was about five hundred population with the usual single main street containing a line of weatherbeaten, false-fronted buildings on each side.

In one of them sat Mike Ferris, lawyer.

At the moment when he saw Clay ride down the street toward the general store Mike was busily engaged with dour thoughts and chewing paper spitballs. That big green fly had been bothering him for two days. Mike chewed lustily on a piece of the local paper, placed the spitball in the rubber band hooked between his thumb and index finger, took careful aim, and let fly. The spitball bounced off the desk—a clean miss of at least an inch—and the fly buzzed triumphantly to the dusty window to begin banging its wings annoyingly against the pane. Mike eyed the remnants of the unchewed paper, decided it was too much trouble to fold and use as a swatter, and kept his feet up on the desk. It was, he thought gloomily, a depressing life.

A man waddled past his front door and window. Madden, the town marshal. A big man, with a protruding stomach.

"Now just why," Mike thought, "should all town marshals be fat? Is it because they eat more? Or is it because they waddle impressively?"

He gave it up as a bad thought, blew dust from a volume of Blackstone that had been on his desk for days, and twisted his feet. Madden was probably on his way down to the office of the Justice of Peace, to pass away the rest of the afternoon. Mike looked around his office and cogitated gloomily.

He was behind with his rent at the hotel, the liveryman was dunning him almost every day for the feed bill for his horse, and old man Gillicuddy had been throwing around some hints strong enough to the point of belligerency that his daughter, along with several others in town, was a nice young girl who wouldn't be trifled with by any romantic young swain.

Mike Ferris eyed the dusty law books that weren't paid for, got up, and placed a sign on the inside of the screen door, OUT TO LUNCH, and followed the waddling progress of the town marshal down the boardwalk.

"He eats too much," Mike thought gloomily, wondering how he was going to pay his bill at the restaurant. Mrs. Chavez, the Mexican woman who owned it, had been putting out some hints lately, almost as broad as those of the belligerent Mr. Gillicuddy.

"What I need," Mike said to the street in general, "is one good case."

Madden had pulled up in front of the general store and was eyeing a rider who had halted at the hitch-rail. The marshal, hand scratching his paunch, was looking at the horse.

"Howdy," he said from beneath a pair of somewhat piggy eyes. "Nice looking horse you've got."

"Isn't he?" Eddie replied. "I raised him from a colt. Mah grandfather in Kaintucky raised his paw on pure blue grass. But the Union soldiers come thu' an' eat up all the blue grass—their horses, I mean, not the soldiers—an' we had to finish him on cawn. All the way from Kaintucky, he is."

"Yeah?" sneered the marshal, still

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caressing his paunch near the gun stuck down inside his belt. "But somehow or other he sort of managed to stop off on the way and git Fred Thatcher's FT brand on his left shoulder."

MIKE stood by and watched. He saw a tall, lean man over across the street, watching; a stranger. Eddie had swung down. He bent and peered at the brand.

"Why, you-all's right, marshal," he said triumphantly. "He *is* branded! Now I'll bet that was the work of some no-account spy!"

Eddie was unarmed, his pistol in his saddle bags. He was thinking fast, and not knowing what the next move would be. The marshal made it.

"Maybe you got a bill of sale fer him?" he asked softly.

"Why," said Eddie blandly. "Ah cain't write, marshal, an' neither could the man who sold him to me. Ah just paid him."

"Don't tell me!" snapped out the marshal. "Tell it to the Justice of Peace. You're goin' down there right now fer a hearin'."

Mike stood there, grinning a little and taking it all in. He saw the tall man striding over. Madden was herding Eddie along the street, Eddie leading the horse of disputed ownership. The office of the Justice of Peace was but a few doors down. Eddie and the marshal disappeared inside. Mike saw the determined man striding toward the office, hand close to the butt of the big pistol at his right thigh, and stepped out.

"I'm a lawyer," he said.

"Glad to know it," Clay Burch said curtly, his eyes on the doorway.

"That method might work—you with a hand on your gun—but I've got a better one," Mike came right back. "For one hundred dollars I'll put your friend in the clear."

Clay stopped and looked at him. "How do you know he's my friend?" he demanded curtly.

"Very simple. "You're both strangers in a small town. You're coming across this street with a hand near your gun while he's inside being asked some questions about the ownership of a horse you and I know belongs to Thatcher. Your friend didn't have a bill of sale for it. My Gadfrey! There's Gillicuddy and his girl. Here, mister," and Mike drew a paper from his pocket and scribbled hastily; a bill of sale. "Sign Fred Thatcher's name to it. It's a bill of sale for that horse your friend is riding. You owe me one hundred dollars. Chances are a hundred to one that neither the marshal or the JP knows Fred's signature."

Clay looked at him and he liked what he saw. He scribbled his signature—Fred Thatcher—to the paper and Mike told him to stick it in his pocket. They went down the boardwalk to the door above on which was a sign, *Claud C. Murphy, Justice of the Peace.*

They pushed in and Mike said, "Your Honor, I object."

Madden the marshal looked up and a grunt went out of him; a grunt of contempt for the seedy looking lawyer.

Murphy was a red-nosed individual with a pair of narrow set, mean looking eyes. His chief source of income was from fines and a three-dollar fee for performing marriages.

"What are you objecting about?"

"This man is my client," Mike said, indicating Eddie. "He's just been falsely arrested, and that's a serious offense in itself. It can lead to repercussions."

"Yah?" snorted the JP. "Then let 'em reper-cuss and be hanged until he shows he owns that hoss bearin' Fred Thatcher's brand."

"He does not own the horse, but his partner does, I believe." Mike said to Clay, "When you retained me to represent this man, sir, you stated you have a bill of sale for the disputed horse. As counsel for the defense, can you produce it?"

The JP spat a stream of tobacco juice into a gobboon and said, "Here comes old Gillicuddy and his daughter. Now I wonder what in blazes that old devil wants?"

Clay produced the alleged "Bill of Sale" dated the day before. Mike was looking out through the door, appearing to be somewhat worried.

"We bought the horse from Thatcher yesterday," Clay said curtly and which, in a way, was true. He had left money.

The Justice of Peace fumbled for a pair of spectacles, chewed on the wad of tobacco, and read the writing.

"*Hmmm!*" he commented. "Looks all right. Hang it, Gillicuddy! what do you mean bustin' in here while I'm holdin' court? Five dollars for contempt, cash in advance."

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Gillicuddy was a big dark faced man who wore a six-shooter. He had a rather attractive girl with him.

"I want to talk to that lawyer there," he rumbled ominously. "You kin take the five dollars out in a weddin' fee They're goin' to git married right here and now."

"Hmmm!" said the JP, his interest perking up, returning the paper to Clay. "Case dismissed. Have you got a license, Mac?"

"Nope, but we'll git one."

"Hmmm!" and the Justice of Peace squirted tobacco juice again. "I—hey, where you goin'?" to Mike.

"Come back here!" roared the irate father and made a dash for the back door, through which Mike had disappeared.

CLAY and Eddie went out into the street. Clay said, "Get your supplies, Eddie, and meet me west of town. Hurry it up before that Justice of Peace and the marshal change their minds. I'm going to look up that broken-down lawyer and pay him. See you later."

He found Mike down at the local livery, saddling his horse. Clay pulled up and looked down with a grin as the lawyer came out leading his mount.

"Where you going?" he asked.

"To get some fresh air," Mike said. "It was a bit stifling there in the office."

"My pardner and me are camping out of town a ways. How about riding out with us and having some supper?"

They jogged out to the edge of town, after Clay bought some grain from the livery. They camped at a dammed up tank two miles from town and cooked the supper from supplies Eddie had bought. Afterward Clay leaned back against his saddle and smoked.

He looked at the lawyer, whose name they now knew.

"That was fast thinking on your part, fixing up that bill of sale for the horses," he said. "You earned that hundred dollars."

Mike grinned back at him, pushing a hand through his thick shock of brown hair. "I knew those horses were stolen, but a struggling young lawyer of twenty-two must eat. Money is all I've ever wanted. If I can ever get enough of it, it will end my troubles and make me a very happy man. You boys appear to be pretty well heeled for plain cow punchers."

"How bad do you want that money?" Clay asked. "There's more where this came from. And we could use a lawyer. How bad do you want money?"

"Bad enough to listen," Mike said.

He listened while Clay and Eddie told him. They prepared supper and ate. Mike didn't return to town that night. He rode away with them.

It was now three: Clay Burch, leader; Eddie McCarthy and Mike Ferris.

Four days later they pulled their second bank holdup, and an alert merchant ran across the street and shot Clay Burch with a rifle as he was running out of the building toward his horse.

V

THEY got out of town long before a timid posse, formed in confusion, made a feeble attempt to follow them. It turned back after five miles and Clay, lashed to his saddle after a hasty bandaging of the wound, rode fifteen miles before he lost consciousness. Eddie and Mike called a halt in a dry arroyo and eased him to the ground. They unsaddled and fixed him up in the wet blankets. He was mumbling about his mother and Kitty. Eddie built a small fire and tried to give him a kind of broth made from jerky beef. They sat over him all night while the storm clouds gathered and it began to rain.

"We've got to get out of here up on the prairie," Eddie said decisively. "There'll be a foot of water over this camp within an hour. Come on, let's find another place to camp."

The rain pelted down and grew in intensity. Eddie and Mike were soaked to the skin. They carried Clay on a saddle blanket between them and tried to rig up some kind of a shelter beneath a cedar tree. Morning found the two of them shivering and Clay in a delirium. He rolled and tossed and cried out until Eddie finally had to hold him down by force.

He placed a hand on Clay's forehead. It was warm and sweating. Eddie looked at Mike.

"He's got a fever and he's soaking wet. He's catching a summer cold that can turn into pneumonia. You stay with him, Mike, while I saddle up and go for a doctor."

"Where?" Mike asked.

"Back where we stuck up that bank.

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We were masked and dressed as cowpunchers. I've still got my suit of clothes with me. I'll shave up and go right back into town."

"Eddie, you're crazy," Mike said.

"Clay's got to have a doctor. I'm going to get one."

He found enough dry wood to build a fire and heat some water. By now the sun was out hot and bright. Clay lay on his wet blankets, still unconscious, while Eddie shaved and changed clothes and saddled up.

He rode off and headed back across the prairies, keeping a sharp lookout for riders. There were none. Early that afternoon he jogged into town, swung down before its only saloon, went in and had a drink. Nobody paid any attention to him. He was just another stranger. People were still talking about the holdup of the bank the day before. The robber who had been shot had dropped the canvas sack of money. Not a penny had been lost.

Eddie listened, asked a few discreet questions, and finally found out the name of the town's only doctor.

Doctor Peterson.

Eddie found him over in the local grocery store, playing dominoes; a man of about twenty-eight with hair so light it was almost white. He was playing with two other men, a look of boredom on his handsome face. He put out a double trey "spinner" and took a ten count from the four on the other end of the line, making himself down for the ten count on the paper pad. A ragged boy of ten came in and said, "Doc, Ma's havin' pains in her stomach again an' Pa wants you to come over right away."

Doc rose lazily, leaving his hand. Eddie had gone to the candy barrel and came back with a sack of sweets. He was crunching hard candy.

Doc said, "You want to finish this hand for me, mister? Mrs. Hankins is having pains in her stomach again. She's been having them for two years, at all hours of the day and night. I give her pills and she don't take them. I write prescriptions and she doesn't have them filled."

"No," Eddie said. "But thanks."

"All right, Harvey," the doctor said to the boy. "I'll be over as soon as I get my kit."

"I'll go along with you," Eddie said. "I got a bad tooth that I'd like you to look at."

They went out into the street and rounded a corner and went into what appeared to be an office.

"My reception room," Doctor Peterson said, waving a hand at the two chairs and small table. "My waiting room. Waiting for patients that seldom come.

"I will now go over and listen to Mrs. Hankins moan and groan about imaginary ills, give her some more pills made of flour and water, and tell her how sick she is. She loves it. Golly, what a life!"

"And she doesn't pay you?" Eddie asked, grinning at the look of disgust on the doctor's face.

"Pay me?" grunted the medico. "Let's see: I delivered Shepherd Jarvis, the first one. Beulah Wanda was the second, a girl. Roy Junior was the third, and I've forgotten the name of the fourth. Or maybe they were twins. Pay me!" He snorted. "Let's have a look at that tooth you're chewing hard candy with."

"They're all perfectly sound," Eddie said, still eating candy from the sack. "But if you'll saddle a horse I might be able to find you a paying patient."

DOC looked at him, his eyes glinting a little.

"Gunshot wound?" he asked quietly.

"That and fever—possibly pneumonia," Eddie said calmly. "One hundred dollars to ride out with me and look him over."

"All right," the doctor said. "Wait'll I get my bag here in back."

"I'll just go along with you while you get it," Eddie said, still eating candy, his right hand down close by his hip.

They went into a back room that at a first glance showed it to be a combination living and cooking quarters. Eddie thought of Mike Ferris' former law practice and decided that the medical man could use a hundred dollars.

He said, "You better take along enough stuff to hold you over two or three days, Doc. He's in pretty bad shape."

"No doubt," Peterson commented. "That rifle ball must have gone all the way through him. Lost a lot of blood from the time he left the front of the bank. Then you got into a rainstorm and put him in wet blankets. Old Newton, who shot him, is boasting and blowing all over town about it. I'll be with you as soon as I get a bag packed. I keep

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my horse saddled all the time in case of emergencies."

That was how it came about that Doc Peterson joined the gang. He worked over Clay for two weeks and finally brought him out of it, weak, and pale.

"He almost had summer pneumonia," Doc said to Eddie and Mike. "We've got to get him out of here and over into the desert in Arizona. There's a place called Yucca City, down below Tucson, where I visited two years ago. That's the place until he recovers. It'll take months before he's back on his feet like he was."

They bought a light wagon and a span of young mules and plenty of supplies, and on a day a week later started the trek across New Mexico into Arizona. On a fall day they arrived in Yucca City. Eddie, driving the team, pulled up on the desert and looked down at the town along a dry creek. Cottonwoods were everywhere, throwing shade into peaceful yards, and the town seemed to slumber.

Doc lifted a leg up around the saddle horn and lit a cigarette.

"There she is, boys," he said. "About two thousand population and one of the finest little towns you ever saw. Half Mexican population and plenty of business for an ambitious young physician," this with a wry grin. "After we crack a few more banks here's where I settle to take up life anew."

"What about the bank here?" Mike asked, looking over at Doc with a grin. "You ever been in it?"

"No," Doc said. "But maybe I will some day."

Clay sat in the seat beside Eddie. He was still weak and had lost weight. "We'll rent a house and lay over here for awhile," he said. "There's still enough money from that Llanos Oros bank Eddie and I held up to hold us through the winter."

"Figuring on settling down and turning respectable?" Eddie asked. "Maybe I could buy out the local newspaper."

"No," Clay Burch said. "Just until spring. Then we'll head back to Texas. I've still got a score to settle with Colter."

They drove on in and camped, and the next day rented a house; a big adobe place with room enough for all and with a small corral out back. Mike sold the mules and they settled down for the winter.

Clay wrote Joe Owens a brief note, enclosing two letters.

The note said:

Dear Joe: We've been friends for years and I know I can trust you. Please give these two letters to mother and Kitty. I got shot up some in a bank holdup in a little town close to the Arizona-New Mexico line, and am wintering here. Write me under the name of Paul Clinton, Yucca City, Arizona. Hope you are well.—CLAY

He saw the stage go out, carrying the letter on its way to the railroad, and he waited in a fever of impatience for what seemed like weeks. Doc had set up practice in town. Eddie was drawing twelve dollars a week as a reporter on the local newspaper. Mike had defended two Mexicans in a horse-stealing case and produced "bills of sale" for the two stolen mounts that got the defendants off free. Clay lounged around the house, cooked their meals, and got back his strength. Each day he went to the post-office and asked for mail for Paul Clinton and each day he turned away in disappointment.

Then one afternoon while the four of them were eating supper a shadow dark-

[*Turn page*]

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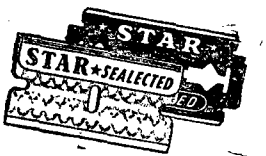

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ened t doorway and Clay looked up to see Joe Owens standing there. Joe, the man who had brought him the news at Bradley's ranch about the death of the elder Burch. Clay rose swiftly from the table, hand extended.

"Joe, you old son of a gun!" he got out softly. "What in the devil are you doing here. Eddie, here's Joe. These other two fellows are Doc and Mike."

Joe came in and shook hands. He was about twenty-six, big boned and slow thinking, and the finest man in the country with a horse. Joe knew and loved horses.

HE shook hands and then sat down at the table as Clay got another plate.

"Just got in on the stage today," he said in his slow way. "Sold out my livery in Llanos Oros an' decided to see what you were doing over this way. I got some letters for you, Clay."

"How's mother and Kitty?" Clay asked.

"About the same. Yore Ma is working in the millinery shop in town. She was a lot upset about you and Eddie busting Burton's bank, but I reckon everybody understood how you felt an' didn't blame you too much. Kitty has her school back for another year. She's still livin' in the same place. But I reckon Colter must have some ideas about her. He shore spends a lot of time in town. Even made a talk to her pupils about savin' money. That's a funny one, hey? Here's the two letters, Clay. I kept 'em in my shirt pocket."

And that was how Joe became a member of Clay Burch's gang.

Clay read the letters over and over again until they became worn. He didn't dare write as the winter wore on and spring came. He knew only that he had to get back to Texas. He had to see his mother and Kitty.

They left Yucca City the following spring, slipping out of town one at a time. Doc's practice had been good and Mike had been doing all right with his law practice. But they still wanted quick money and big money, and they knew how to get it. For that reason Clay Burch didn't get home that summer. During the holdup of the seventh bank that year a hard riding posse hit after them and drove them south on running horses. They fled across the International Boundary into Mexico and found sanctuary there during the next winter.

They didn't dare come back. Word was out through Texas, Arizona and New Mexico that Clay Burch was head of the worst gang of bank robbers the Southwest had ever known. Clay paced the dirt street of the little Mexican town where they lived and bided his time. He thought only of his mother—of Kitty—of settling down in Yucca City and forgetting the past.

He knew that he had to go back. You could never love a woman like Kitty and stay away. He had to go back. He had a score to settle with John Colter, but he wanted the man to wait, to sweat in fear. The seven bank robberies had netted less than thirty thousand dollars; and that wasn't much when split up evenly among five men.

Clay waited until another spring had come. He was the undisputed leader of the gang, his word law among them. They accepted that fact, abided by his decisions. They said nothing the day he told them they were heading for Kansas.

"We'll raid up there this summer," he told them the night before they were to pull out. "Small prairie towns with plenty of money. Texas is too hot for us this year. We'll let things cool off and come back to get Colter next year."

They crossed the boundary line one night and started their long trip northward. They raided in Kansas that year and then fled into the hills of the Oklahoma Territory, where they wintered. Here there was no law. They felt safe. Clay had grown gaunt and haggard. But always his thoughts kept turning toward Texas and Kitty and his mother. He had not heard from them in almost two years now; he had not dared to write.

VI

ON a day when the warm spring weather came to Texas again Sheriff Bill Clark sat in his office talking with Burton and John Colter. Colter had driven over from Cedar City in his surrey behind a sleek span of blacks. He and Burton had consolidated their two banks, and Colter was immensely wealthy. He had taken every penny of his depositors' money that he dared and secretly bought stock in a big new railroad that was building into the west. With its completion Colter had sold the stocks at fantastic prices and come out with a flat two hundred thousand dol-

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lars in profits for himself.

"Heard any news of Clay Burch lately?" he asked the sheriff.

Old Bill blinked and loaded up his corncob pipe, shifting his bulk in the office chair. He was aging now.

"A little," he said non-committally. "I read the papers now and then when I get time."

Colter snorted. He knew that the sheriff didn't like either him or Burton; that Clark, honest lawman though he was, half sympathized with Clay for that first holdup.

"Papers!" snapped back the banker testily and brushed at his clean shaven jaw. "That's about all you lawmen do to protect honest people these days is read the papers. Burch and his gang have been raiding all over Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, sticking up one bank after another. They tore Kansas apart last year and what happened? Not a man of them caught or even shot."

"Sure did surprise me about Joe Owens joining up with Clay," Clark said mildly. "Maybe he was a little put out because you got a mortgage on his livery and he had to sell quick—or, the way he put it, give the place away to keep you from foreclosing. But I was still a mite surprised."

Burton shifted a booted foot and said, "You're dodging the issue, Bill, and we don't like it. Clay has been gone for over two years now. But his mother still lives here and so does his girl. He'll be back, and he'll be back this year. You mark my words."

"Frankly, Bill," Colter said uneasily, "we don't like the way you're running things in this office."

"Now that's just too doggone bad, I reckon," Clark said sadly. "If you boys will just wait until I can go get one of my wife's bed sheets for a hanky, I'll bust down and bawl tears in it an' use it to blow my nose."

"Now wait a minute, Bill," Burton put in hastily. "There's no reason for us to get all riled up among ourselves. We've got to pull together on this thing. Just put yourself in our places."

Clark laid down the corncob on his desk. He was a good natured man, slow to anger, but he had a reputation in the county of being a holy terror when he got mad. It was quite obvious that he was mad now.

He leaned across the desk and his level eyes met those of the two bankers.

"Now I'm going to tell you two boys a couple of things, and by turkey! you're going to listen. The first thing I want you to get straight is that I'm running this sheriff's office in the interest of the county taxpayers and not for the two bankers in said county. You two pulled a rotten deal on as fine a man as ever lived. He killed himself on account of it. Oh, I know—it was 'business.' But you wanted them three buildings so bad you got greedy and took 'em without giving old John a chance to try to hold 'em.

"If it had been me in Clay's place, I'd have shot the both of you dead, and you know it. But Clay Burch wasn't a killer. You notice that in nearly three years of robbin' banks nobody has got shot. I'm not condoning his actions, mind you. But he took it out on you two in the worst way it would hurt: he burned down those three buildings you took from old John and then robbed one of your banks.

"He sent word back that he'd get the second one, and he'll do it. So all you two expect *me* to do is hire about a dozen deputies at the taxpayers' expenses and keep 'em loafing in *your* banks month in and month out to protect *you*. I ain't wasting this county's money by doing no such fool thing.

"It's none of your business how I run this office, and I'm under no obligations to give you any information, particularly since I plan to retire. But I will tell you two a couple of things: For more than one year I've had a bounty hunter trailing Clay's gang. He's after that three-thousand-reward out for Clay and the thousand apiece for the four others. He's paying his own expenses, not using the taxpayers' money.

"He trailed them all through Kansas last summer and down into Oklahoma Territory, where they wintered and let out reports they was in the Dakotas. He finally got on the good side of Joe Owens and is now a sixth member of Clay Burch's gang of outlaws. Bart sends me regular letters every week or two. I know exactly where they are and what they're doing. I know what they plan. Bart's keeping me informed."

"Bart who?" demanded Colter.

"I said Bart!" snapped back the sheriff. "I've also got Kitty Renner's house staked out every night, just in case. Two of my deputies have been laughing like the devil watching you, Colter, trying to spark her nights and not gettin' any-

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where. She's still Clay Burch's girl. So that's about all. You two come stamping in here like a couple of lordly bulls in a corral full of heifers, and you can go stamping right out again. You run your business and I'll run mine. That's a flat notice to get out of my office and not come back until you've got more business than you had today. Now get out—both of you!"

THEY got out in the face of his wrath. They realized for the first time that they had badly underestimated this aging, doddering lawman. They went over to the bank to take care of some business, and at four o'clock, when school was out, Colter was waiting at Kitty's house.

Colter had started out life as a cow puncher, but an educated and intelligent one. He had saved his money because money meant Power. When one of the men in the bunkhouse ran short of money between paydays and wanted to borrow twenty dollars John Colter was ready to loan it to him, for three dollars extra.

The fact that the men of the various outfits he worked for hated him mattered not at all, for he had looked upon them as pawns in his own game, as a means of someday making him rich; they and hundreds of others like them. So he had finally quit punching cows and gone to work as a teller in a bank to learn the business. He loaned his own funds on crooked, "short term" deals, and by doing so took over a few homesteads and small ranches in the face of indignation from people who knew him. He sold the property again and, within a few years, owned a crumbling, ill-managed bank.

Now, at forty-three, he wanted a wife in the big home in Cedar City, and had selected Kitty. He stood there with his hat off as she came up on the porch, a bundle of papers beneath her arm. Today had been examination day at school, and she would work far into the night correcting papers and making out report cards.

"Hello, Kitty," he greeted, and opened the front door for her. "How are you?"

"All right, Mr. Colter," she answered a little tiredly. Her face showed the strain of the years of reading about Clay—and waiting. She knew that he loved her and some day would come back.

"When will you start calling me John?" he demanded banteringly. "Kitty, you know how much in love I am with you. Sit down and let me talk for a moment."

She put the papers on her writing table and sat down. It was to be another proposal.

He seated himself across from her, his rather handsome face earnest. "Kitty, for more than two years I've been asking you to marry me," he said gently. "I know what you've been going through. Everybody knows you were Clay Burch's girl and they know how much pain it has caused you and his mother to stick it out here, waiting for either his return or word that he's been shot in a bank gunfight. He's an outlaw with a price on his head, Kitty. He's one of the worst scourges in the West, he and those desperate men of his. He can never again return to normal life. Sooner or later he'll be captured and sent to prison or killed.

"You can't go on ruining your own life waiting in a cause that is hopeless. Kitty, I've had a feeler from a group of ranchmen to buy out the two banks in Llanos Oros and Cedar City. Just a feeler, mind you, but I'm thinking of accepting. I want to go further west into New Mexico or Arizona Territory and pioneer banking somewhere out there. Think what it means, girl. A chance for you to put the past behind you and start all over in a new place without the stigma of Clay Burch hanging over your head.

"You say the word, Kitty, and I'll sell out and pull up stakes and take you with me."

"That's kind of you, Mr. Colter."

"Call me John. Please," he begged.

"Very well, John," she answered. "I'm honored at the thought of what you're offering. But I've waited for Clay this long, and I can keep on waiting for him a little longer."

He was too wise to press his suit further. He rose, hat in hand. "All right, Kitty, I understand. So there is nothing for me to do but wait. And I'll wait for you for the rest of my life, if necessary. I'm a one woman man, Kitty, and you're the woman. I'll be over again to see you sometime next week."

He went out to his surrey and got in, feeling more encouraged than he had in months.

She at least had called him John.

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VII

VERY nearly a month later Clay slipped into town one night, shortly after dark. He pulled up in the mesquites not far from Kitty's house, and the sight of it sent a pang through him. He had covered thousands of miles since the last time he had held her in his arms. He had been hungry for her every moment. This was the time he had waited for, dreamed about, savored over and over again in imagination.

He swung down and tied his horse to a mesquite bush and carefully removed his spurs, hanging them over the saddle horn. The old tenseness was upon him again, making him feel all tight inside. He knew that Bill Clark was no fool; that Bill knew a man in love with a women would come back to her sooner or later.

That was the way wolf trappers caught a too elusive, cunning lobo. If everything else failed, stake out a she and wait for the leader of the pack to come to her.

But he had to take the risk. He crept in among the thorny bushes and crossed the road, vaulting the white picket fence. Just let him see her once, he thought, and the thought was almost a prayer. For after tonight the old outlaw life would be finished. From now on it would be him and Kitty in Yucca City, Arizona.

He slid up back of the kitchen and paused, crouching low to keep from being outlined against the white paint of the walls. His heart was pounding, the constant strain of being hunted, of hiding out nights, of long runs after bank raids, getting on his nerves.

He slipped up on the back porch. There wasn't a sign of a light anywhere and uncertainty took hold of him. He surmised that the letters he had written to her had been opened and read by Sheriff Clark before being put in her postoffice box. He had been careful in what he had written. Mostly that he loved her and that some day they would be together again.

He paused by the kitchen door, his heart pounding. There might be a dozen six-shooters and shotguns waiting for him when he opened that door. But he had to see Kitty before he left on this last job. He knocked, waited, again feeling that tightness in his midriff.

Then the door opened slowly as his hand unconsciously dropped to his gun. She stood there, a dim outline in white, and he heard her low, tense voice.

"Come in, Clay. I'm alone."

He went in quickly and grabbed her into his arms, hungrily, kissing her again and again. Kissing her on the lips, her cheeks, her hair; smothering her with hungry kisses.

She finally pushed back from him, gasping a little.

"Kitty—Kitty—Kitty!" he whispered and grabbed her again.

"Clay, come inside," she whispered back. "I have the blinds pulled and a newspaper over the turned down lamp. It's been that way every night for a long time. I knew you'd come back."

She led him into the living room and sat down on a couch. The room was in semi-gloom. He sat down beside her and she ran her hands over his face.

"I'm trembling all over from the sudden release from strain. Night after night, month after month, I've sat here in this house and waited, expecting to hear a knock on the door. Yours or those of a dozen armed lawmen with guns, to hide and shoot you down when you entered. It's getting me, Clay. I can't stand much more of it."

"I know, Hon," he said, his arms around her once more. "I can't stand much more of it either. But after tomorrow we both won't have to. Eddie and the rest of the boys are waiting for me a few miles out. We slipped down out of Oklahoma, riding mostly by night. We're taking Colter's bank tomorrow just before closing time. A debt I've got to square up. After that there will be no more. It's our last job. We're heading out for a place in Arizona called Yucca City to settle down and go straight."

"Clay, don't do it," she whispered. "Look at you. You've aged. Your face is tired and you've lost weight."

"I'll get it back again after tomorrow. I've got to go over and see Mom."

"She's not here any more, Clay."

He leaned back and stared at her. "Not here? How come?"

"She's working in a store in Cedar City. I guess she couldn't go on day after day reading about you in the newspapers and facing these people. She has a good job and there's a man of considerable means paying her attention. After all, she's only in her forties and your father has been dead for a long

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time. I think they're going to get married some day."

"I'm glad," he said. "I'm glad for her sake. But it looks like I won't be able to see her."

"She still loves you, of course," Kitty Renner said. "And so do I. Clay, you must have known how strong my love for you is to go through all this. You're an outlaw with a price on your head. You were morally right in robbing Burton's bank, but not the others. Yet, in spite of this, I've waited, realizing what you went through after your father killed himself."

"*They* killed him," he said harshly. "Burton and Colter. I squared up with Burton and I'm squaring up with Colter tomorrow."

KITTY gave him a long steady glance and then lowered her eyes.

"I know," she said a little sadly. "But it still made you a hunted man and there has been no turning back. It was too late to turn back after you robbed Burton's bank here in town. You ran low on money in a few months and then it was another bank—and another. Clay, I can't go on waiting like this always. It must be me or the outlaw life."

"It'll be you," he said. "After tomorrow it will be you and nothing else, Kitty. We've got fresh horses waiting fifteen miles west of town. Bart, a new member of the gang we took in up in Oklahoma, arranged for them. We'll make a hard three-hundred-mile run into New Mexico, and there the gang is breaking up and going different directions. They'll all gather in Yucca City, which you'll love, Kitty. Doc is going to settle down and start practicing again. Says he's going to get married and raise a family with a girl he met down there while I was recovering from a gunshot wound."

"Clay, you were wounded?" Kitty asked. "You never mentioned it in your letters."

"It would have just caused you and Mom worry, Hon. Anyhow, Eddie is getting itchy to get printer's ink on his fingers again. He's going to work on the newspaper and hopes to buy it. Mike is a lawyer we picked up, but this will make you laugh, Kitty: Mike wants to go into the *banking business!*" Clay laughed softly at the thought of Mike holding up banks to start one of his own. "Joe, and they don't come any better than good old reliable Joe, who holds our horses for us—is going to open up another livery. Bart, the new man who joined up last winter, hasn't said anything yet about his plans."

"And you, Clay?" she asked.

"I'm going to play it safe and hit for Colorado for awhile, Kitty. I'll let the other boys drift into Yucca City and get settled, and I'll drop in later. I'll find something down there for us, possibly a ranch in the desert. We'll all take up our lives again and forget the past. How does it sound, Hon?"

Something like a sigh went out of her. "My conscience says it's all wrong, Clay, but my heart won't let me admit it. But there is one thing I want you to remember, Clay: this is the last one. It must be. I've waited these years and lived a lifetime. I've gone on month after month, eating my heart out for you, wondering where you were, if you were in jail, or lying shot in a hidden camp someplace. A woman has a right to live with her husband, to have children. She has a right to all the things a wife deserves. Security, contentment, and a family.

"You haven't given any of them to me so far, and I don't like to say it but I shall. No matter how much I love you, Clay, I can't go on this way any longer. Going into a schoolroom day after day and seeing children point and say, 'See Miss Kitty? She's the sweetheart of Clay Burch, the outlaw who robbed all them banks. They say she's just waiting for him to come back and get her. My Ma—' and then I hear what their mothers feel about you. So I can't go on any longer."

"You won't have to," he said. "You wait one month from tomorrow, which is the fifteenth of May, and then resign your school. Give yourself two weeks to get to Pueblo, Colorado. At twelve noon on June the first I'll be standing on the steps of the post office waiting for you. By that time the boys will be in Arizona. You and I will get married in Pueblo, travel a bit, and drift down into Yucca City. And on the day we do Clay Burch is a dead man and another man named Paul Clinton takes his place."

He rose and said that he'd better be going if he was to make the rendezvous with the others at midnight. She went to the kitchen door with him, and he heard the little jerky sounds that told him she was crying.

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"It's all right, Hon," he said, patting her awkwardly. "I know how you feel; this nervousness of waiting. It's got all the boys too. You wouldn't know Eddie any more. He used to be such a happy-go-lucky cuss but now he can't sleep and his stomach is all haywire. Doc says it's nervous indigestion from the strain we're going through as hunted men. But everything will be all right tomorrow. I've planned all details down to a hair-line. We won't be inside the bank more than ten minutes."

She clung to him and kissed him again and again and he finally had to go. "Remember the date, Kitty," he said. "Noon on June the first. And get word to Mom about me, will you?"

"I'll get word to her. I'm going over next week. And I'll be in Pueblo at noon sharp on June the first. And now, Clay, I think that you'd better get out of here and let me go to bed and have a woman's good cry to loosen up my nerves."

He went out into the night, faded across the road into the mesquites again, put on his spurs and mounted. He reined away at a walk, working the horse west, and finally rode at a jog trot.

Miles to the west the flat prairie began undulatingly to be choked with small forests of mesquites and a few prickly pear beds. A big gully cut the floor for two miles and down in the gully, hidden by a cluster of Wild China trees, the men of Clay Burch's band of outlaws sat around a small fire, drinking coffee and talking.

They didn't look much like road agents. Even now, there wasn't a hard face in the group, and none of them could be called old. Doc Peterson held the honor of being the "old man" of the bunch. Doc was crowding thirty.

HE still laughed about the time Eddie had come into his office complaining about a bad tooth while he chewed hard candy. And now, a couple of years later, Doc was a changed man. His face was tired and drawn looking, the strain of being a fugitive beginning to tell on him too. They had held up a small bank on the Oklahoma Territory-Texas bor-

der, and Joe had a bandage on his arm as a result of it. The second wound suffered by the band in more than two years. And they hadn't killed a man or even wounded one. They had burned plenty of powder, throwing shots all around towns to frighten and confuse the people when necessary; but Clay's orders had been followed, and that was the one light thought on his conscience. When they shot they shot high or into the ground.

Eddie McCarthy sat next to Doc, wearing spectacles and reading a book by the light of the fire. He had carried books in his saddle-bags at all times, discarding the volumes as he bought more; and one of those books had almost proved their undoing. A hard riding posse had, after losing their trail, stumbled upon one of the discarded tomes and again picked up the gang's tracks. After that Eddie buried or burned his books at their campsites. He was reading now, tearing out each page as he finished and using it to make more light.

He tore out another leaf, fed it to the fire, and bent as the flames brightened. Sparks shot upward and died.

"Eddie," gritted Mike, "why don't you read it all first and *then* burn the book —the whole business at one time?"

"Much easier this way," Eddie said. He laid down the volume and removed his spectacles to polish them with a bandana. He put them back on the bridge of his nose once more. "Calm down, boy. I know you're nervous and so am I—it's why I'm reading. But after tomorrow you can sleep nights with a clear conscience. The Clay Burch wild bunch will be no more."

"That'll suit me," Doc said. "I'm tired of this life, and I'm frank enough to admit it. Hiding out in camp, running horses until they drop, going without meals and then eating cold food and raw, black coffee that would take the hide off a rattlesnake. Sleeping in saddle blankets until you smell like a horse. I'm glad Clay is quitting. If he hadn't, he'd be shy one member of the outfit. It's not worth it, boys."

"Shucks, we all know it by now," Mike said testily. "Clay feels the same as us. Wonder if he found his girl?"

"If he didn't run into an ambush or a stake-out by Clark, he found her," Eddie said. "Bart, for the love of Pete stop looking at that watch. It's two hours until midnight and we've plenty of time. Clay said that if he wasn't back by then we'd know he'd run into a stake out around Kitty's house, and to haul out of here fast. We've got two hours yet."

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"I'm just nervous, that's all," Bart said, putting away the watch. "We're in Clay's home country now and they'll be looking for us. We're short of grub and facing a three-hundred-mile run into New Mexico."

"You sure about them horses?" Joe Owens asked from where he reclined across the fire, his left biceps bandaged.

"I bought the best," Bart answered. "There'll be a Mexican kid holding them for us at the edge of Sandy Creek fifteen miles west of Cedar City where the creek forms a horseshoe bend."

This was the truth. Bart had bought the horses and placed them according to Clay's instructions. For the bounty hunter was playing it safe. He knew that Clay had never liked him, had been suspicious of him from the beginning, but he had gotten in on the good side of slow thinking Joe and Joe had recommended him. Bart sat there near the fire, drinking coffee, a dark complexioned man of twenty-seven with a droopy mustache.

"I ain't known down this way," he said, putting down the cup on a rock. "I would feel a lot better if I could ride in town in the mornin' an' get some grub."

"That's for Clay to decide," Doc said. "And, hang it, Bart, put away that watch. We've got two hours yet to see if Clay shows up!"

His nerves were on edge, like the rest of them; drawn as tight as the strings on a guitar. It was always like this before pulling a big holdup—wondering who would get shot next. They all knew that the law of averages was running out, the sands of time taking their inevitable toll. Only two gunshot wounds in two years, thanks to Clay's masterful planning. No posse had caught up with them yet, but sooner or later it would happen.

Bart put away the watch for the fourth or fifth time. "Maybe you're right," he said. "Just that one job we pulled when Joe got creased tells me the game's not worth it. A bust that got us nothing except a hole in your arm. I hope this one turns out all right tomorrow. Clay figures from two to three thousand apiece if we're lucky. Well, I'm going to turn in. Call me when Clay shows up."

He went to his blankets, slipped off his boots, and slid a wiry frame in between them. "*Ahhh,*" he sighed. "How I could sleep if only we wasn't going to bust that bank tomorrow."

The others didn't sleep. Somebody suggested a poker game, and Doc brought out a pack of new cards. He stripped it and they played for matches, whiling away the hours. Along toward midnight, when Eddie had just raked in a big "pot" consisting of all the matches Mike had, Joe suddenly raised up on an elbow and went rigid.

"Be back in a minute," he said softly, and slid his carbine from its saddle scabbard.

He climbed the bank, and the others, sitting woodenly by the now dying fire, heard the click of the mechanism as Joe levered a shell into the firing chamber. Joe saw the horseman's outlines jogging toward him and brought the cocked carbine to his shoulder.

"That's close enough," he called, the hammer on the .44-40 far back under his thumb.

"Me—Clay," called Clay's voice in answer.

"I'm glad you showed up," Joe answered. "We was beginning to get a little nervous. I was about ready to start saddling, thinking Clark had the place staked out and had put you in irons."

"Not a soul around," Clay answered happily. He was still remembering the feel of Kitty in his arms.

VIII

CLAY BURCH walked his mount over to a cut bank, slid it down half on its haunches, unsaddled and picketed it with the others. He came back to the fire carrying saddle and bridle. Bart got up and put on his boots.

"How's Kitty?" Eddie asked.

"Same as ever," Clay said. "The strain is beginning to tell on her too. She'd been expecting me for a month or so. I'm meeting her in Pueblo, Colorado, June the first to get married. We'll drift down and catch up with you boys in Yucca City."

"You took a big chance going in to see her," Bart said pointedly. "We shook that last posse not more than two hundred miles from here. That sheriff named Clark you boys mentioned, dumb as he is, ought to be able to figure out you'd be back to see her. She's been your sweetheart for years, according to what the boys say. I don't like it, Clay."

Bart liked to play it safe. He knew

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that Clay had never particularly liked him and that if a hint of his real business with the gang leaked out—just one bit of suspicion—Bart would be a dead man.

Clay said coldly from across the fire, "If you don't like it you can saddle and ride. I'm still running the outfit and I will be until tomorrow afternoon just before three o'clock. Just keep that in mind."

"Aw, Clay," Joe put in loyally. "Bart didn't mean anything. He's just on edge, that's all. I am too and I'm not 'shamed to admit it."

"I know. But we'll make it. Let's go over the plans once more while Bart is here because I want him to leave before daylight to pick up some grub in town and then meet us in Cedar City." He picked up a stick and again drew out a map of the bank's location, the streets, and the surrounding buildings. "All right, Bart. You first."

"I'm going to ride in casually and preferably by a back alley; not the main street. I'll leave my horse at the hitchrack of the hotel on the corner and directly across the street from the bank. I'll have a couple of drinks and see if there's anything in the wind. If I hear anything I'll get 'drunk' and stagger out of the hotel bar and fall down trying to get on my horse. That will draw attention from you fellows, a lot of them probably knowing you and Joe and Eddie, since you used to live around these parts. If there's no hideouts in the stores and other buildings I'll be lounging near my horse within reach of my saddle carbine. Any citizen steps into the street with a gun in his hands will get a leg shot from under him with a few forty-four-forties."

"Correct," Clay nodded. "And you be sure you shoot low, Bart. We've never spilled blood yet and we don't aim to start killing while on Colter's bank—our last holdup. Any questions?"

"Nope," Bart replied. "I got it down pat."

"Good. And you, Doc?"

"I'll wait 'til noon when everybody is home for dinner, then drop in at the livery stable cat-a-corner from the bank. I'm going to have the smith put two front shoes on my horse. While he's doing it I'll loaf around the office and rest of the place and see if there are any shotguns or Winchesters laying around a little too handy. There will be, and perhaps men with them, if there are any suspicions you'll be back to settle with this Colter fellow, like you sent him word. But the livery stable is the logical place. A man with a good repeater, shooting from the livery stable at a distance of not more than forty yards, could really do some damage to us."

"We wouldn't have a chance," Joe put in. "Go on, Doc."

"I'll be out front leaning against the wall when Clay rides by. If there is anything which doesn't look right, I'll have my right leg drawn up and my boot resting against the wall. Bart can signal from over his way, using the same method, if things don't look right around the hotel. So if my boot is drawn up against the wall it means look out and get out fast! I'll be fogging leather right behind you, Clay."

"Right," nodded Clay. "Eddie?"

"I'll come in from the west, riding down the cross street to the bank. A few people might recognize me, inasmuch as I used to go over there to Cedar City to pick up weekly news items for the paper. So I'll be about three hundred yards from the bank when you come in from the south and pass Doc in front of the corner livery. If I see you and Doc make a break toward me, I'll cover you with shots that'll break a few windows. But if things are all right, I'll ride on in and swing down. You'll be smoking a cigarette but not where anybody in the bank can see you through the windows. Doc will time it so's we all enter the bank together, you with the sacks beneath your shirt." He suddenly chuckled. "I hope that Ben's hands don't tremble, seeing as how we heard he was transferred to the Cedar City Bank."

CLAY grinned tightly, and gave a nod. Eddie was letter perfect.

"So far, so good. Now you, Mike."

"There's a sort of little park across the street about even with the back of the bank and the alley. There are benches there where the farmers like to sit and whittle while they talk. I'll have my horse there and be sitting whittling with a jackknife. From there I can see Bart across the intersection, in front of the hotel bar. I can see Doc in front of the livery's smith shop. If any men sitting around on the benches have too many guns handy, I'll go out and pretend to be fussing with my saddle. So you watch me too, Clay, when you ride

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in. If I'm fussing around my horse instead of whittling, you'll know something has mis-fired. Otherwise I'll get up and lead him across the street to the bank."

"Perfect so far." Clay nodded, pouring coffee from a tin bucket into a tin can cup. He looked at Joe. "That means three of us—Bart, Doc, and Mike—will be close by the bank and on the lookout for trouble. Bart in front of the hotel, Doc in front of the livery, Mike across in the little park. And now you?"

"Same as usual, Clay," Joe answered. "With this big mustache I growed and these seedy lookin' clothes, I'm just a tramp rider unless I happen to run into somebody from Llanos Oros who knows me. If they do, they'll know in a flash we're back to bust that bank of Colter's in a matter of minutes. So I'll put my hoss close by the bank and then stroll up the street to look in the buildings and see if there's anything unusual. I'll have to be careful because I'm so well knowed. When you boys step inside I'll be right there, timin' it perfect to hold the horses. We can't be in that bank more'n five minutes. It's goin' to be the *longest* five minutes I ever spent in my life, sittin' out there in plain sight of maybe a dozen people who know me an' what I'm doin' there.

"I ain't much of a hand at prayin' but you can bet yore life I'll be sayin' my prayers durin' that time and promisin' the Lord that if he'll just let me git through this one scrape I won't be holdin' up no more banks. So, Eddie, when you an' Mike an' Clay jump back of the money counters with them sacks while Bart and Doc have their guns out you want to move faster than you ever moved in yore life. If you're in there longer than five minutes my head'll probably be plumb grey when you come out. I'm scared, boys. I'm more scared than I ever was in my life—but you can depend on me to do my part."

Doc raised up from where he had been putting away the cards. "Sounds perfect to me, Clay. It's always worked before and it'll work this time. If there's anything wrong, some of us ought to be able to spot it and signal. And I'm kind of like Joe. I'm also scared. It's probably no more risk on the job tomorrow than any of the nineteen other banks we've robbed. It's just the thought I'd hate to get trapped and lose everything on this final holdup just as we quit and settle down to respectability in Arizona. And I'm frank to admit, Clay, that I wish you'd abandon the idea."

Clay's face went hard, though not at Doc. There was no such thing as anger among them.

He said quietly, "I know how you feel and I don't blame you, Doc. You or the rest. But I'm not forgetting that Colter is responsible for the death of my father. So any man who don't want to take that risk tomorrow is perfectly free to back out, and there won't be any hard feelings on my part. But I'm going to bust that bank of John Colter's tomorrow if I have to do it alone."

"You won't have to, Clay," Doc said. "And you boys better turn in and get some sleep. You'll need all you can get for the next few days and then some. And, Joe, you remind me to put some fresh bandages on that arm before we start in the morning."

He went to his blankets and pulled off his boots and the others followed suit. All except Clay Burch. He sat by the fire, staring moodily into the dying embers, thinking of Kitty and tomorrow.

AT daylight that morning Sheriff Bill Clark rose as usual to help his wife get breakfast. He had been doing it for nearly thirty years. He went into the kitchen to build a fire in the cookstove and then put on water for the coffee.

While they were eating breakfast a man rode out of the mesquites and up to the house. Clark stared and dropped his fork in astonishment.

"Good lord, maw!" he grunted. "It's him!"

"Who?" she asked, peering.

"That bounty hunter I've had on Clay Burch's trail for over a year. He joined Clay's bunch up in Oklahoma last winter. Howdy, Bart, howdy," he greeted, stepping to the doorway of the kitchen and shaking hands. "Come on in and have some coffee. Had an idea I'd be hearing from you in a day or so but figured you'd write. Never dreamed you'd just ride up."

"Clay's here," Bart said, and took off his hat. "Thanks, Mrs. Clark. Been a long time since I've had coffee cooked by a housewife. I'm sure glad it's about over. I've earned that seven thousand dollars."

"It's not in your pocket yet," the sheriff said, attacking his eggs again. "Clay's a sharp one."

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THE sheriff's wife sighed deeply. Then she glanced at the bounty hunter.

"By the way, how is he?" Mrs. Clark asked. "It near broke my heart when he went bad."

"He's all right," Bart said. "A little nervous like the others. He slipped in last night to visit this Kitty Renner girl of his."

"I know," the sheriff said. "I had a deputy staking out the place. She lives right over there two hundred yards from here. That's why me and maw moved into this house after Clay turned bad. So I could keep an eye on Kitty's place."

Bart sat there sipping the coffee after blowing on it in the saucer. "You won't have to watch Kitty after today," he said.

"How come?"

Bart nodded toward Mrs. Clark. "Can I talk business in front of your wife?"

"Sure. Anything you want to say."

"All right, Sheriff, I'll let you have the whole story. A little while before three o'clock this evenin' we're going to bust John Colter's bank in Cedar City wide open. I'm in town now to buy supplies because nobody except you has ever seen me here and I won't be recognized. The boys are breaking camp this morning and drifting in one at a time. We're supposed to tear out of there and go west for fifteen miles where I've got a string of good horses waiting. I started just to tell Clay I had 'em and not bother. But he might have wanted to go look 'em over and that would have been bad. He's still just a little suspicious of me, even after I helped in that last holdup in north Texas. So we'll tear out of there, change to fresh horses, and then leave. That's to be the last one. The gang is breaking up."

"They'll be breaking up all right," Clark said grimly. "But not like they think."

"There's a place called Yucca City, over in Arizona. The boys wintered there once while Clay was recovering from a gunshot wound. All of us are heading for there except Clay. He's going north to Pueblo, Colorado, where Kitty will meet him in six weeks to be married. And now I'll give you the exact plans."

He went over the plans for the holdup in complete detail until the sheriff was satisfied. Mrs. Clark sat with them at the breakfast table as they studied a pencilled drawing on the tablecloth. Her face was a little sad. She knew her husband.

Bill Clark finally leaned back in his chair and looked up at Bart. "I got it all and I don't think you need to worry about results. Anything else before you go on uptown."

Bart looked at him levelly. "Yes. It's being understood that there'll be no split with you or anybody else on the rewards."

"We wouldn't touch a penny of reward money on those boys," Mrs. Clark put in indignantly. "Not when we knowed Clay's folks. How do you think we'd feel taking money after helping to bury him or send him to the pen?"

"I just wanted to be sure, ma'am. I spent near a thousand dollars of my own money finding that bunch. I've rode through rain and hail, gone without meals, been chased by a posse to earn that three thousand out for Clay, dead or alive, and a thousand apiece on the other four. I just wanted to make certain. And I want to make one more agreement with you, Clark."

"What's that?"

"I don't think there'll be any slip-up today, but you never can tell. Anything can happen. They just might get away, or part of 'em anyhow. If anybody gets clear I'm going to barrel right on out of there with them, go to Yucca City, and trap them there to get the rest of the rewards."

"That might be a good idea, son," the sheriff said a little grimly. There was open contempt in his mien for the cold-blooded stand Bart was taking on the thing. He wanted them shot down without warning by a fusillade of rifle and shotgun fire. Clark had bluntly refused. He was going to try and get Clay and the others to surrender.

"Yep, it might be a good idea for you to keep goin' on into Arizona, Bart," he said again. "You see, when I hired you and promised that you'd get all rewards if you'd help me trap those men, it didn't include any ideas that you'd help rob a bank. That wasn't in the agreement at all. And there ain't nothin' in the laws of Texas says you had a right to do it. So just to play it safe you better hit out just like you planned. Go on by yourself out of the state. I'll see that you get your money on the gang.

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But as long as you're in Texas I'm duty bound to arrest you and hold you for trial, even though you'd probably get turned loose. So you roll on out this afternoon, and I think I'd stay out of Texas from now on. You've been identified with Clay's band and a jury might not understand. You might be sent up."

"Been sort of thinking I might turn lawman myself some day," Bart replied. "Better bounty hunting that way. Well, I got to be going, Sheriff, and I'll send word to you from New Mexico or Arizona where to send the reward money when you collect from the state. I'm also goin' to be pretty nervous, thinking that some sworn in deputy sheriff might get a little too ambitious and put a ball through me."

"If you're hinting that I'll double-cross you and collect your money, you ain't got any worries." And the way Clark said it told Bart that it was a curt dismissal.

Bart put on his hat, thanked Mrs. Clark for the coffee, and went out to his horse. He rode by and saw Kitty but did not speak and identify himself. She would know, seeing him coming from Clark's house, the truth of what Clark planned and might warn Clay when he entered Cedar City.

A few minutes later Clark was saddled up and on his way to the neighboring town.

IX

PROMPTLY on the dot, the Cedar City Bank opened its door every morning at nine o'clock but John Colter, its president and owner, never arrived before ten. He rose leisurely after drinking a cup of coffee brought by his Negro valet, let the man shave him, and then breakfasted downstairs in the big home where he lived alone; but, he hoped, not for long. He wouldn't rest until Kitty Renner was sharing it with him.

By the time Colter had finished breakfast each day, the valet had changed into uniform complete to black silk topper. He was shrewd enough to know that no matter how out of place such a rig was it brought Colter more respect from the natives.

On that fateful day John Colter got out of his carriage in front of the bank. He tipped his hat to a passing lady of the town and then said to the Negro, waving a cigar, "One o'clock, Tom."

The Negro said, "Yes, suh," and drove off at a trot up the street.

Colter went inside. He condescendingly waved the cigar at a well known rancher while his sharp eyes played over the number of people before the tellers' wire stalls. He hoped they were depositing. He had been gambling in stocks, gold mines, this time, and found himself the victim of a swindle. They had taken him for just one hundred thousand of his money. If the truth ever leaked out Colter knew he would have to make good the bank deposits from his own pocket or clean out the place and flee. That was why he had all his assets in cash right in the vault. He and Burton weren't getting along so good nowadays and were to dissolve partnership. And if things went too badly Burton intended to haul out with all the money in sight and disappear over into New Mexico or Arizona.

Colter nodded here and there and went back to where Ben, former employee with Burton, was working.

"Looks like a good morning, Ben," he said. "Any special business?"

"About the usual, Mr. Colter. Two ranchers wanting to talk with you. Loans, I imagine from the way they acted. And—oh, yes, Sheriff Clark is waiting in your office."

"Old fool!" muttered the banker in a low voice, for Colter had never forgiven being ordered out of the sheriff's office. "I'll be glad when summer comes and his term ends so he can retire. Just wait until we get the court house over here by voting Cedar City—in as the county seat. I'll make the sheriff jump when I pop the whip. What does he want?"

"He didn't say, Mr. Colter. Just that he'd wait."

"Old fool," muttered the banker again and went into his office. "Hello, Bill," he greeted jovially. "Glad to see you again. We never see enough of you over this way. No—no—stay in my chair. I'll sit here."

"You're seeing me now," Clark said quietly. "You'll be seeing some more people about a quarter to three this evenin'. Five or six of them."

"Who?"

"Clay Burch and his gang. They're going to bust this bank fifteen minutes before closing time today."

Colter's back ramrodded itself. He came to his feet, his face changing color. Every cent of money he

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had in the world was in that bank!

Clark went on mildly, "Clay sent you word he'd come back and square up with you like he squared up with Burton and he's sure keepin' it. This is to be his twentieth bank."

"How'd you find out?" whispered Colter.

"About Clay coming back? My bounty hunter joined his gang. He's one of them now, though for my money he's as bad as any of them. I've got their complete plans down to a hairline and I'm actin' accordingly. Ed Ives, my deputy over in town, is bringing over about eight good men. I'll get Sonny Rogers, my deputy here, and we'll pick about eight or ten more good men. They'll be all around here."

Colter let go a sigh of relief. He relit the dead cigar in his mouth. "That ought to be enough to blast them down with the first round, but have them concentrate their fire on Burch. Make sure he's killed first."

Clark got up a little heavily and a little disgustedly. He took his corncob pipe from his mouth and spat into a gobboon. "I don't recollect sayin' anything about killing them," he said acidly.

Colter stared at him in disbelief. "Not kill him?" he half roared. "What kind of a sheriff are you? The worst gang of bank robbers in the West come in here after my depositors' money and you say you're not—What kind of a sheriff are you?"

"I ain't the kind who's going to shoot down Clay Burch in cold blood to give a certain banker a free hand with Clay's girl, Colter," he said coolly. "That's what you had in mind, wasn't it? Always trying to use other people to do your dirty work. I told you once before that you'd better run your bank and leave the running of the sheriff's office to me. Now I'm sort of tellin' you again. I'm going to try and capture Clay and his men without bloodshed. I'm going to be in this office of yourn and wait until they all get in the bank. Then I'll step out without a gun on and ask him to give up. If he and his men break for the door, my deputies will know what to do. You go on about yore business as though nothin' is about to happen. Don't tell any of the clerks. They'll be nervous and shakin' an' that might warn Clay and his boys that somethin's wrong. You're not to tell anybody, savvy?"

COLTER gave him a glance of dislike.

"All right," half growled the banker. "But you'd better make mighty sure there's no slip-up, Clark. I think you're a fool for not shooting them down but, as you say, it's your business. Might not make much difference at that. They won't surrender anyhow—not with nineteen bank robberies against them—so you'll probably get him dead."

"I probably will," Clark said a little heavily and walked out.

Colter stood there and watched him go, his eyes narrowing. No doubt about it, Clark knew his business. Colter wasn't worried too much about his money—now. What he was worried about was Clay Burch. If Burch was caught and went to prison it might be years before Kitty's loyalty to the outlaw would waver and then bend to the banker's pleas. But if it was made doubly certain that the outlaw would be shot down in front of that bank—if Clay Burch was dead, ignobly blasted into the street, Colter would have the county newspapers remind people continually that she had been his girl. He'd sympathize with her, protect her, offer to take her further west where the facts weren't known.

Colter snapped his fingers in sudden decision. He went into the main part of the bank. "Ben, I've got important business this morning. Can't see anybody. I'm going out for awhile."

"All right, Mr. Colter."

The banker went back into his office and out the rear door to keep from passing the people waiting to see him. He came out in the alley and into the cross street that ran east and west across town, bisecting the main street right by the bank. He saw the livery cat-a-corner and the owner working over a forge, getting ready to shoe a horse. That would be the place.

That's where Boyd Arnst would be.

Colter walked down the street for nearly three hundred yards and finally came to a one room, unpainted shack where Boyd lived. Colter stepped into the open doorway.

Although it was past ten o'clock in the morning Boyd was still in bed. He lay reading a dime novel about Indian fighting, a she dog curled up on the dirty bunk beside him. Trash and papers littered the one room and the table

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held an accumulation of dirty dishes that hadn't been washed in a week. A feeling of revulsion and disgust went through Colter as he surveyed the room and its loutish looking occupant.

"Boyd," the banker greeted.

Boyd raised up, staring in disbelief at the man in the doorway. He dropped the book.

"Good gravy, Mr. Colter!" he gasped out, sliding out of bed in his sock feet. He reached for his pants and began jerking them on. "Whut in the world are you doin' down here? I was comin' down to see yuh but I ain't feelin' good lately. Somethin' wrong with my stummick. I been thinkin' I got to git a doctor."

"There's nothing wrong with you that a little work won't cure," Colter cut in sharply. "I lent you a hundred dollars last month to buy a new saddle and some clothes so you could go to work. You spent the money in the saloons and playing penny ante and didn't try to work."

"I ain't been feelin' well."

"Never mind. The ten dollars interest on that short term loan is four days overdue. I want it."

He had known, in lending the money, that Boyd would never pay it back. But Colter had figured he could go on getting five or ten dollars a month out of the man for two or three years.

"I ain't got it, Mr. Colter," half whined the man. "I ain't even had enough to eat lately. That's what's wrong with my stummick."

"Very well, Boyd," Colter said more kindly. "I'm a fair man. I don't wish to push you. In fact, I'll even give you an opportunity to earn that hundred this afternoon. It will take nerve, but I've seen you in a couple of fights in the hotel bar room and I know you're not afraid of the devil himself."

"No sirree! I shore ain't."

"Fine, and when you finish this job I just *might* be able to get you on as a deputy here in town to guard my bank and keep the peace. Boyd, do you know Clay Burch the outlaw?"

Boyd was pulling on his rundown boots. He nodded. "Shore do, Mr. Colter. I've knowed him fer years. Got into a fight with him onct in school. Licked him, too!"

COLTER sat down and began to talk. Boyd showed uneasiness at first, but under the other man's smooth words he soon began to nod and grin.

"Why, shore!" he said triumphantly. "It'll be easy. I'll wrap up my rifle in a gunny sack and hide it down back of the livery. Long about two o'clock I'll be settin' on the fence whittlin' a stick. I'll wait back of the corral till they all bunch up and start across the porch toward the front door. Then I'll level the barrel across the fence and take him right between the shoulder blades. I can hit a running coyote at a hundred yards near every shot an' Clay won't be more'n fifty yards. He'll never know what hit him."

"All right," Colter nodded. "And of course if you mention my part of this, you understand that I'll have you run out of the country," he added coldly. "But if you play it right, there's an extra twenty-five dollars besides the cancellation of the note."

"Fine, fine," Boyd said eagerly. "You ain't got a thing to worry about. I know how to keep my mouth shut, an' if I git to be a deputy I could do plenty fer you an' you fer me. I—uh—could you let me have two-three dollars to git somethin' to eat with, Mr. Colter?"

Colter gave him the money and went out, returning to his office, humming.

Colter spent the longest morning of his life, more nervous than he thought he could ever be. He paced the floor of his closed office a hundred times, chewing savagely on unlit cigars from the box on his desk, the men who had wanted loans long since forgotten. At one o'clock he pumped air into his lungs as he went outside to where his Negro valet, Tom, sat in the driver's seat, his back a stiff ramrod, holding the reins and whip in his dark hands.

"Tom, I'm busy in the bank and can't get home for dinner today," Colter said. "I'm going over the books with Ben." This was blurted out in a loud enough voice to be heard around the intersection of the two streets and not arouse suspicion on the part of the two men he suspected were listening. At least they were strangers; one in front of the Owl bar and another over by the open door of the livery's smith shop. "You take the rig on back to the house and I'll eat across the street. Call for me at the usual time."

"Yes, suh, Mistuh Colter," the Negro smiled and touched his black silk hat brim. "I'll be right here."

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He drove off with the empty rig and Colter crossed the street, walking past the wiry looking, dark complexioned fellow who had been coming in and out of the bar all day, it seemed like. Had Colter not known, he would have classified the fellow as just another out-of-work cow puncher. But the banker's mind was buzzing. Clark, the old fool, had disappeared somewhere. Colter wanted to talk with him. He wanted to talk with almost anybody right now to relieve the strain. I'm getting soft and middle-aged, he thought angrily. Fifteen years ago this would have been a breeze. I've got to hurry up and marry Kitty before she thinks I'm too old.

The coffee tasted sour and bitter in his mouth and the sandwich was as dry as parched earth. He paid and went out, crossing the street again to the bank. He paused on the porch and saw Boyd Arnst lounging down by the corral in back of the livery building. The two streets with their intersection were quiet.

Women shoppers went their way and at a nearby hitch-rack two horses dozed with hips slumped and switched sleepily at the flies.

Colter entered his bank building on the corner and a man limped up to him and said, "Mr. Colter, I'm a little short of money. Could you loan me fifty dollars for about a month?"

"No," snapped the banker. "Come back tomorrow. I'm busy now." He looked coldly at Del Marcos, a Mexican groceryman, in loud argument with one of the tellers.

Another man stood nearby, chewing the stub of a pencil as he tried to make out a deposit slip.

Colter went back to his office and the limping man followed anyhow. Clark got up from the chair back of the banker's desk and the limping man pulled a repeating rifle out of the right leg of his overalls. He jacked a shell into the firing chamber and then took another cartridge from his pocket and slipped it into the magazine.

Clark said mildly, "You're actin' too nervous. Go out and try to look like a banker instead of a man waiting for his bank to be held up. Marcos wants to talk with you and argue for awhile. That other deputy I swore in never will get that deposit slip made out."

The man in the overalls pulled up a chair back of the door and cracked the door slightly and sat down to peer through. He lit a cigarette.

"There's two of them here already," the sheriff said over his corncob pipe. "One in front of the livery, another in the park. Bart is across the street."

"I saw him," grunted John Colter.

THE banker went out and asked Ben to bring some of the books and made a pretense of checking the figures. He kept glancing at the big clock on the wall. Forty-five more minutes to go. At two-fifteen a man and a woman entered the bank. She was in her forties and still very attractive, the man thin and distinguished looking. Colter went over as she extended her deposit slip and money.

"How are you, Mrs. Burch?" the banker asked.

"Fine, thank you," she said.

"You're getting quite a savings account here. That's what makes for prosperity. Savings. Anytime you'd like to try setting yourself up in business just

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come to me. All the money you need is waiting here in this bank."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Colter," the man with Clay's mother said. "But if I can persuade her to become Mrs. Tilden some day, I rather imagine she won't be interested in business. She'll have a full time job taking care of the home I plan to build somewhere out west." He was an easterner.

Colter kept glancing at the clock as they finally went out. Three men in the building besides Clark. There undoubtedly were others in the upstairs rooms of the hotel across the street; in a good position to fire down at less than forty yards. Colter glanced out through the front windows to where the rider still lounged with his back against the bar's front wall. A drunk had lurched out of the swinging doors and stopped to ask for a match. Colter saw him rock back on his heels as he lit at the dangling cigarette, but didn't hear the man's words.

"Not long now."

"Where's the sheriff?" Bart asked tensely, striking another match and holding it to the wobbling cigarette.

"In the bank office. He's goin' to try to get them to surrender. We got the upstairs front rooms of the hotel filled with men. It's a cinch. Others scattered around. It's a cinch."

"All right. But you warn him I said no welshing on those rewards. They're mine. Don't forget to tell him what I said. Clay and his bunch are sharp. I'm risking my neck plenty on this deal. If they ever suspect the part I'm playing my life won't be worth a plugged nickel."

The man rocked back on his heels again, turned around and lurched through the doors of the hotel's saloon again.

And forty minutes past two came.

Doc's horse, newly shod on the front feet, still stood before the livery's smith shop. Mike was just across the street, sitting alone on a bench in the cool shade of the cottonwood trees. Eddie was coming in from the west, jogging along as though he didn't have a care in the world. Cat-a-corner from where Doc leaned against the front of the livery was the bank. Beyond it Joe let his horse plod along from the north. He hadn't shaved in two weeks and his clothes looked as though they were about ready to drop off. He was pulling on a cigarette butt so short it endangered his long, blonde mustache. He rubbed at the pig bristles on his jaw and rode on with hat down low over his eyes.

Clay came in from the south, riding up the street past the little park. He saw Doc leaning against the livery; and though he didn't know it, Doc was uneasy. Doc didn't know why, but some instinct was warning him that this place was dynamite. He could feel it. It might have been the look in that loutish looking man's face as he hung around the corral and read a dime novel and took sneaking pulls from a pint bottle of whisky. Doc wanted more than he had ever wanted in his life to lift up his boot against the wall in warning to Bart and to Mike and to Clay. He wanted to step across to the little park and say to Mike, "Look here, boy, things don't look right for some reason. Let's haul out of here and let Clay come back some other time and square accounts."

But they had cracked nineteen banks and each job had gone off almost perfectly. sometimes they had been driven out by gunfire before they finished. Sometimes they had ridden hard for days and nights without having obtained a cent. But they had never yet been caught. Doc looked at Mike again and pondered the decision.

He had no way of knowing that Mike was thinking the same thing; that Mike was half tempted to go out and lift up a front hoof of his horse or fuss with his cinch to signal them to mount and ride out.

Clay was almost abreast of Doc now, watching Joe amble along from the opposite direction. He reined his horse down a bit to put him in front of the bank porch at the exact moment Joe arrived to grab up the reins. Eddie had broken into a lope now; the kind of lope telling of a thirsty, impatient young cow puncher heading for the nearest bar. Clay looked at Doc and saw his boot half go up, and wondered if the action was involuntary. He saw Mike get up and go to his horse. He saw Eddie close by now, and he saw Bart.

He watched Doc. Doc's boot stayed down. Doc was afraid that they would laugh at him for getting a case of jitters and turning tail.

Clay Burch felt the tenseness in him, knew it was nerves over his final job; regretted he hadn't postponed it for a day in order to try seeing his mother.

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But that might have been too risky, and it was too late now. The die was cast.

He rode toward the bank as Doc swung up and Mike led his horse across the street.

He started to swing down and never made it. From somewhere over by one of the buildings a rifle roared and the bullet struck him from behind, knocking him down across the neck of his horse.

Boyd, jacking up his nerve with repeated drinks out of the bottle after his slow brain had finally remembered the three thousand dollars reward for Clay Burch, had pulled the trigger over slightly blurry sights.

X

BEFORE the shot had been fired, Clay had swung his horse around with the others, facing south, the direction from which he'd ridden in. That was for a quick getaway westward down the street up which Eddie had ridden. The slug had caught him just under a shoulder blade and as he fell forward one of his spurs went into the flanks of his horse. It leaped forward and helped to raise him in the saddle.

He grabbed frantically at the horn and yelled hoarsely to Doc, "It's a trap! Get out quick!"

Doc had swung in beside him as they shot around the corner in a hail of bullets, obviously to his own danger. Mike had hit leather in a running bound. Eddie had gone back up into leather. And Joe was pounding around the corner to get beyond those frantically firing, frantically cursing men with rifles.

They shot past the rear of the bank and a man ran out of the back door, a six-shooter he had left on Colter's desk booming in his hand. It was Sheriff Clark. Enraged at somebody's blunder, Clark began yelling for men to mount the saddled horses held in the alley back of the hotel.

Guns had started to roar from a half dozen different places. The popping of Winchesters sent screaming women and children running for the protection of doorways as five men spurred out of town at a run, one of them low over the neck of his horse.

Doc swung in on one side, slashing hard at his running horse with his spurs, riding knee to knee while Mike roweled in from the other side. They pounded down the street at a run. Clay fought the pain and dizziness of shock. He had been badly shot and he knew it. Joe was bringing up the rear. Bart was nowhere in sight.

"Get out and leave me!" Clay called out hoarsely, reeling in the saddle.

"Leave you, nothin'!" Doc's voice roared back, riding almost cinch to cinch and trying to steady him in the saddle. "We'll— Look out, Mike! He's falling!"

"Leave me and get out," Clay called again.

"You'll throw off the shock of that bullet in a little while," Doc yelled back. "Stick it out, boy, stick it out and let's run for it. We'll get clear yet."

He reached back into a saddle-bag and brought out a long strip of white cloth. Clay never exactly knew how Doc, riding hard beside him, got it under his armpits and knotted it tight.

They ran for it while sixteen men ran for horses and took up the pursuit. The firing had stopped now, the outlaws out of town and beyond range. It was to be a grim ride, and grim it was. They left the town and hit the prairie, pounding hard at the sides of the heaving horses. Clay was a little more conscious now. Doc had yanked out a bottle of whisky from the other saddle-bag and managed to get a big drink down him. Clay seldom drank and the liquor cut new life through the terrible pain. He could hardly breathe. He gritted his teeth and hung on.

Joe was two hundred yards behind the others, bringing up the rear, an old single-shot .45-70 in his hands giving off occasional bellows. He had to twist around in the saddle to shoot, and didn't have a chance in a hundred of hitting those men four hundred yards behind. But he kept firing and reloading and firing again, burning up ammunition. A lucky shot finally struck a horse, sending rider and unfortunate animal somersaulting in a cloud of dust. Some of the men stopped to help the senseless rider and the others sheered off.

They were in the clear for the moment, Clay and the others. Joe spurred and caught up.

Clay managed to get himself erect again. He was aware of Doc's anxious, professional face on his left and Mike's on his right.

"I'm all right now," he called out when they were five miles west of town.

"You're not all right," Doc yelled.

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"You've lost too much blood. But hang on until we get to those fresh horses."

They covered that fifteen miles in record time, coming up to a halt to where a Mexican youth of sixteen had jumped up excitedly and was holding the picket ropes of several sleek legged geldings. He knew nothing about the men except that he had been hired to have the horses ready. They were ready.

The five outlaws pulled trembling, sweat drenched horses to a halt and swung down. Four of them made a run for Clay and caught him as he fell from the saddle. The Mexican youth stood staring.

"Another 'orse come, I theenk," he finally said.

It was Bart. He drove in among the trees on a lathered horse and slid it to a halt on trembling legs. He hit the ground and began yanking at his saddle.

"How's Clay?" he asked, running over with his gear.

"Shot bad," Doc said. "He's lost a lot of blood. We sure owe somebody back in Cedar City a big debt of gratitude—some dumb jackass who got excited and shot before we dismounted. If he'd have waited just thirty seconds longer, they'd have shot everyone of us down on the bank porch. So our luck's still holding out."

HE was down on his knees with more of the long bandages, swathing Clay's chest with skilled fingers. He tied hard knots, uncorked the whisky bottle and held it to Clay's lips.

"It was a trap all right," Eddie said. "A hornet's nest. What I'd like to know is how they found out. Clark's no fool. That thing was too pat. He had information right to the minute. How did he get it?"

"Maybe he had Clay's girl's house staked out and was listenin' outside the window," Bart put in hastily. "Maybe she tipped off Clark."

"Maybe you're a liar too, Bart," Eddie said coldly.

"Maybe I am," Bart admitted. "But women are funny creatures. She could have done it to stop Clay robbin' banks an' then tryin' to git him off with a short prison sentence. They've done it before."

"Cut out the jawing and get saddled," ordered Clay from where he lay flat on his back. "And don't turn loose those horses of ourn. I want 'em."

"What's eating you, Clay?" Eddie asked. Mike and Joe already had saddled and came up leading their fresh mounts.

"I'm done for, boys," Clay Burch said. "Clark and his men will blow in here any time on our tracks. I can't go on and you know it. But I got you boys into this mess. It's my fault. I'll lead those bunched horses on picked ropes as far as I can before they catch up with me. That'll give the rest of you a chance to scatter and hit for Yucca City. Now saddle me a fresh horse quick and get me up."

They saddled feverishly, throwing anxious glances back to where, nearly two miles away, a group of tiny dots had emerged from a forest of mesquites, hard on their tracks.

"W'at I do now?" the frightened Mexican boy asked.

Bart's hand dropped down to his gun and shifted the holster up enough to let him get his hand into his pants pocket. He brought out a gold coin and flipped it through the air.

"Son," he said. "What you do now is get on that pony of yourn and burn the breeze out of here so the sheriff will not put you in jail. *Andale!*"

They helped Clay back into the saddle and gave him the lead ropes on the lathered, sweat drenched mounts they had ridden so hard for fifteen miles. Doc was still protesting.

"I don't like it, Clay. We can still try to make it."

Clay shook his head, his face drawn with pain and pale from loss of blood. "I'm done for, boys. Split up and go your ways. The old gang is breaking up. So long, men, and good luck."

Doc and Eddie rode off as Clay spurred into the underbrush of the horseshoe bend. Joe was riding alone over west and Bart's horse was disappearing in a southwest direction. Mike was gone.

"I still don't like it," Doc said again. "He's sacrificing himself for us when we ought to stick with him."

"He always was ready to. Well, Doc," and Eddie leaned over to stick out a hand. "When you get to Yucca City, look up 'Specs' Boggs, brilliant young reporter who has returned to resume his job with the *Yucca City Star*."

"When *you* get in," Doc grinned, shaking, "hunt up Pete Tweed, eminent young physician and ask him to look at that bad tooth you got from eating too

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much hard candy. And I'll bet you a hundred dollars in gold that I beat you there."

Eddie laughed. "Agreed!" And in this moment all the old tenseness seemed to have left him and made him as he once had been; happy-go-lucky and carefree. They split and spurred away as Clay, leading the played out horses, came out of the underbrush on the far side of the creek and swung off in a northerly direction.

He headed for a forest of thick mesquites a half mile away, hoping to get into cover before the posse arrived on their own exhausted mounts. He knew they'd never catch the others now; not with those fresh horses under them. It would be a breeze for the now disbanded gang if only they kept away from towns with telegraphic communications; and they were too old and experienced heads at this business of running from posses to make such a mistake.

Clay drove on into the mesquites and got through them, too weak even to brush at the limbs that struck at him. The horizon ahead was getting a little blurry and he thought he heard the pound of hoofs somewhere to the rear. He remembered digging in the spurs and trying to get more speed out of his string of tired horses. But the sky seemed to have turned dark and that was about all he remembered, except for a faint jar when he hit the ground.

He came out of it aware that his head was resting on a slicker roll and that he was flat on his back on the grass again. He heard wheezing sounds and again felt the bite of raw whisky in his throat.

"Don't—drown me with the stuff, Bill," he finally gasped out.

Clark was kneeling above him, red faced and puffing, corking the bottle.

"How'd you feel now, Clay?" the sheriff asked.

"Awful sick and weak and tired, Bill. What about the boys in my outfit? Did—did they make it?"

CLARK swore feelingly and rose to his feet. "God must have been purty disgusted the day I was born. He must have been short on a supply of brains and just gave me the dregs of what He had left. After twenty-five years as a soldier, marshal, Texas Ranger, and then sheriff I have to go and fall for them tracks you made with that string of played out broncs. They got away, slick and clean."

"It wasn't your fault, Bill. They're on fresh horses, as you know."

"That's what makes me so blasted *mad!*" Clark half roared. "I knew you had these hosses out here. I could have had men here with guns. I could've had fresh hosses for us to keep chasing the others. But I had to be so blasted *shore* you'd never git out of what I had planned. Me an' three deputies inside the bank and half the hotel filled with others, plus more strung out. And we'd have got you too if some blamed idiot hadn't got buck fever and shot before I had a chance to call on you to surrender when you came inside the bank. I'd like to git my hands on the man who fired before you boys got out of the saddle."

"I'll be glad to tell you the name—though I'd never have thought you'd pick such a man as deputy."

"Who was it?"

"Boyd Arnst."

"Boyd?" bellowed Clark in astonishment.

Clay managed a faint grin. "Eddie saw him just as he shot from the corral back of the livery, and then went legging it down the street like a scared jackrabbit. Bill, you ought to retire. When a man gets so old he has to hire men like Boyd Arnst to help him, it's too bad."

Clark turned to face the waiting posse of silent men who had been sworn in as deputies. He blistered the air with a choice vocabulary of oaths, his big hands clenching and unclenching in his rage.

"Just you wait," he roared savagely. "Just you wait! I'll take his neck in my han's and twist it off at the roots or he'll tell me which one of these deputies spilled the news and caused that ambush to turn into a fiasco. Well," he finished, mopping at his sweating face with a handkerchief, "I guess one of you boys better git back to town after a fagon to bring Clay in. Sonny, I want you to go over to Hennifer's ranch and git a fresh horse and burn the breeze to the nearest telegraph station at Pocowanta. Flash the news to every lawman in Texas to be on the lookout for the split up members of Clay Burch's outlaw gang. Tell 'em we got the leader."

"It won't do you any good, Bill," Clay called. "We always kept away from towns with telegraph communications."

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He wondered why Clark hadn't said anything about the New Mexico and Arizona lawmen too. A frown puzzled his brow and he lost consciousness again.

XI

IT was not until noon of the second day that Clay came out of it again and found himself in bed in Bill Clark's house. He didn't see any guards around, but he noticed that the screens had been removed from the two bedroom windows and heavy wicker wire substituted. Holes had been drilled through the door and wall just above the knob and the chain running through them told him that there was a big padlock on the outside.

He tried to turn his head to peer out the window and a groan came from his chest. Almost at once the padlock rattled and the chain slid through the holes. The door opened and Clark came in, chewing and swallowing, a napkin tucked in his shirt front. Mrs. Clark was right behind him.

She came over and placed a hand on his forehead. "No fever, Clay," she exclaimed in satisfaction. "I've been hopin' and prayin' you'd come out of it. You've been unconscious for two days."

"The Doc had to cut that rifle ball out of your chest," Clark said. "It went all the way through and made a big blue lump under the skin. He just slit the skin and pulled it out with a pair of tweezers."

"How do you feel now?" the sheriff's wife asked.

"I wish Boyd had done a better job."

"What you need is food. I've had chicken broth on the fire for two days. And I'll get you some water. You must be dying of thirst."

"I am," Clay croaked.

She went out and he looked at Clark. "Bill, I want to ask you something. Was it—was it Kitty who told you? I won't believe it even if you say it."

The sheriff shook his head. "It wasn't Kitty, Clay."

"Then who?"

Again Clark shook his big head. "Some things a lawman can't talk about, boy. I'm sorry."

"One thing's been puzzling me. You didn't send word to New Mexico and Arizona about the—boys. Only Texas. Why?"

Clark couldn't explain that his agreement with Bart would allow the bounty hunter to take care of things over in Yucca City.

He said, "I'm a Texas lawman, Clay. If they're caught in Texas, I'll go after them and bring them back here in irons to face trial for holding up Burton's bank and trying to stick up Colter's. But if they git free to Yucca City, Arizona, it's out of my territory."

Clay stared at him. "So you know?"

"Yes, I know."

Clay was silent for a few moments, looking up at the white ceiling. He knew what was in store for him. He looked at Clark again. He could see her house from the wire covered window, by turning his neck a trifle.

"Has Kitty been here?" he asked.

Clark shifted uneasily. He cleared his throat and began to peel a toothpick from a match, using a thick thumbnail. He cleared his throat again.

"She's not here any more, Clay. She resigned her school yesterday, sold all her furniture to the secondhand store up town, and took the stage out. I didn't ask her where she was going. I sort of got a hunch it'll be Yucca City, Arizona."

Mrs. Clark came back in with a pitcher of water, a glass, and a steaming bowl. Clay drank thirstily, ate the broth and biscuits, and went to sleep again.

This was early summer and the fall term of District Court, convening every three months to handle felonies, wouldn't come into session until September. Clay lay there that day, beginning his slow recovery, unaware that Clark had gone to Cedar City on business.

Clark rode into town just at noon that day and went straight to Boyd Arnst's one room shack. He swung down heavily and stepped into the open doorway in the face of the she-dog's yapping. Boyd was bent over the smoking stove, frying some meat. The place was its usual filthy jumble with a ragged saddle and worn blankets piled helter-skelter in a corner. There was also a worn rifle leaning its muzzle against the wall.

Boyd Arnst straightened and turned. Hope went into his face at sight of the sheriff; hope of the reward for the capture of Clay Burch. And fear followed it as he thought of his part in the game. He knew Clark too well.

"Howdy, Bill," he greeted affably. "Shore didn't expect to see you here.

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How's things in Llanos Oros?"

"You rat," Bill Clark said. "You loutish, lazy, good-for-nothing rat! I oughta bust that thick skull of yourn wide open with a six-shooter barrel and then feed you to the coyotes."

BOYD'S flushed face turned color. Colter had been angry over the results of the shooting of Clay, and only the fact that Boyd was loaded enough on whisky to bluster and threaten to talk had made the banker reluctantly pay over the extra twenty dollars, plus the note. Boyd had spent some for groceries and most of it for whisky. He had been almost dog drunk ever since the shooting and his face showed it.

His eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks flushed. He hadn't shaved in a week.

"Why, Bill—" he began but Clark cut him short.

"Don't 'Bill' me, you unwashed coyote! Where'd you find out that Clay Burch and his bunch was goin' to rob Colter's bank? How come you were there with that rifle in the corner and shot him? How come you busted in on the party and shot him and let the rest git away? Talk up, Boyd, or I swear I'll bust open yore skull. Stop that dog from yapping! You might as well tell me or I'll beat it out of you. How come you knew they were going to hold up that bank?"

"Well, Bill—well, sheriff, it's like this. I—uh—I was goin' out to see if I couldn't shoot a coyote an' I stopped down by the livery to rest a bit an'—"

Clark stepped into the room and slid his six-shooter from its sheath at his fat hip. He advanced upon Boyd and Boyd began to whine.

Thirty minutes later Clark came out of Boyd's cabin, the maddest he had been in fifteen years. His slow anger had reached the boiling point while Boyd told a whining story—and then asked for the three thousand dollars reward—and Clark was in a black rage. He swung up into leather and loped down to the back door of Colter's office, leaving his horse in the alley.

He pushed in through the door.

Colter looked up from some papers he was going over. The blustering old fool was back again, the banker thought; probably to make excuses for letting Burch's gang get away. Just because Boyd had bungled the job on Clay had been no reason at all why the rest of the gang should have been allowed to escape. Colter leaned back in his chair and looked at the sheriff.

"I didn't think," he said icily, "that you'd have nerve enough to stick your head in this town again, Clark. Not after the bungling job you pulled here. I'm glad you're going to retire one of these days. When we get the county seat moved to Cedar City, we'll need efficient officers."

"You shut up!" Clark cut in, his hands trembling from the towering rage that had him afire from within. "You shut up, you hear me? I've just come from Boyd Arnst's stinking shack. I had to threaten to beat him up before he spilled what he knows, but I got the story."

"Why, Clark—Bill, I don't know what you mean."

"I said shut up!" Clark thundered savagely and leaned across the desk, pointing a trembling finger. "I've been mad a lot of times in my life, but I've never been as sore as I am right this minute. You knew I had this bank ringed with armed men, including three inside. That man behind the door of this office could have shot two or three of them down before they got out the door, if Clay had refused my demand for surrender. I had it all figured out—to keep out of line of his fire when I called for the wild bunch to surrender. Marcos and that other deputy I swore in would have cut loose too, the nerviest men I could find and trust. And there were a dozen other guns planted all around. They wouldn't have had a chance, that gang. Not a chance—except for a crooked, swindlin' banker who wanted to make sure Clay was killed so's this banker could take over his girl. Blast your rotten hide, Colter! I ought to arrest you and throw you in a cell for obstructin' justice."

"Now wait a minute, sheriff," Colter said smoothly, rising from his chair. "You're all upset. You're mad and you've lost your head. Tell you what—my carriage is waiting outside and so is dinner in my house. Come up and have a drink for an appetizer and then a lunch and cool down."

Bill Clark spat. Not into the gobboon this time. He spat on the carpet.

"I'd choke on every bite of food I swallowed in your big, fine house, knowing it was bought with money from people even like Boyd. Ten dollars a month interest on a hundred-dollar loan. More

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than a hundred percent interest a year."

"Business is business," Colter said frigidly.

"So is the job of running a sheriff's office. So I'm not going to arrest you. But I'm sending Sonny on a fresh horse to the nearest telegraph station with a telegram to the state bank examiner to come down here and look over your books! You're crooked, Colter! You're crooked all the way down your backbone. That bank examiner will be here within a week, and if he finds one thing wrong with your books and notes, I'm going to clap you in irons."

He went out and rode back to Llanos Oros and two days later got ready to leave again.

HE came into Clay's room, gunbelted and carrying a canteen that day, and Clay, lying among the pillows, knew he was prepared for a long ride.

"Trouble, Bill?" he asked. "Looks like you got enough with me on your hands."

"Sonny boiled in here on a run-down horse this morning," Clark said. "The bank didn't open this morning in Cedar City. Colter sold his house last night to Clayton, who owns the C three brand. Gave it away. He hauled out some time during the night with all the bank's funds. Them people in Cedar City are cleaned."

"And me—I'm going on trial for robbing banks," Clay Burch murmured.

He went on trial in September, entering the courtroom with his wrists shackled and wearing a pair of leg irons. The two grim deputies who accompanied him, one on either side, took him to the table where his attorney waited and removed the handcuffs.

He hadn't heard a word from Kitty during the summer months while he recovered from the wound. And somehow he didn't blame her for not writing. She had gone through more than two years of agony and shame, waiting for him, and the final blow had been too much. But he knew she was in Yucca City, and his mind told him that she had gone for only one reason: to be with Eddie and Joe and the others and wait for him.

That was what gave him strength the day he was ordered to stand up in court in his leg irons and receive sentence.

"Have you anything to say before sentence is passed?" the judge asked.

"I don't reckon it would do much good, Your Honor," Clay Burch replied. "The facts in the case have been pretty well brought out. Two crooked bankers rooked my father and caused him to kill himself. I struck back at them. Not being a killing man, I hit them where it would hurt the hardest: by robbing one of their banks. I find myself in the ironical position of being sentenced mostly on the testimony of one of the men who is responsible for the death of my father: Burton, sitting over there with that triumphant sneer on his face. The other man who might have testified against me in the Cedar City holdup—John Colter—was unfortunately unable to appear. It seems that he knew the bank examiners were coming and absconded with all the money. I guess that's about all."

There was dead silence in the court room as the judge looked down. The place was packed with men and women who had known Clay most of his life. The judge glanced at a paper on his desk.

He said: "The robbing of one bank in vengeance against an alleged enemy might have, in the light of extenuating circumstances, brought you a much lighter sentence. But the record is clear. Your career as a raider over several states has proven that beyond any doubt. So normally I'd sentence you to a maximum term of five years for the robbery of the Llanos Oros Bank. But there are warrants for your arrest for robberies in New Mexico, Arizona, and Kansas. Those warrants will be waiting for you when you finish your sentence—to go back to these places and again stand trial. Therefore, I'll save them the trouble. I sentence you to not less than twenty-five and not more than thirty-five years at hard labor. Court's adjourned."

He banged with his gavel and rose. The courtroom spectators rose. Clay Burch stood there in his leg irons as the judge passed down the aisle and disappeared into a small room they called his "chambers." And Clay Burch knew; he knew the vicious prison system in Texas for men sentenced to hard labor.

He had just been sentenced to death.

Clark touched him on the arm. "Come on, Clay," he said not unkindly. "I'll have to take you back to jail."

They led him away. He thought of Kitty and his lips tightened. His mother was in the East with her new husband, and for that Clay was glad. It would

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help her to forget. He thought of Doc and Eddie and Joe and the others; free men under assumed names down in Arizona. Living free lives.

"Don't worry, Clay," his attorney whispered as the handcuffs went back on his wrists again. "I'll ask for an appeal. We'll get a new trial, if I have to carry it to the State Supreme Court. It's not as bad as it sounds."

"It couldn't be," Clay said and went down the stairs with his guards.

Clay Burch was to remember those words for quite some time afterward.

CLARK and two deputies, ready for travel, came over to the jail and got him the next morning and took him to the stage station, shackled. Mrs. Clark was there with a basket of food. She handed it up as the men entered and people stood around gawking.

"Clay, I'm awful sorry," she said in good-bye. "Here's something to eat for you boys on the way to the railroad. Now you be a good boy and in two or three years maybe Pa can do something to get you out."

He murmured his thanks and the stage got under way. They rolled into the railhead late in the afternoon and went out again at sundown, Clay sitting in the coach seat with his legs shackled and with one wrist manacled to Sonny. He slept in the cramped up seat that night with Clark handcuffed to him.

Clark had wired ahead and there was a prison van waiting at the station. They got out inside the prison walls as the iron gates clanged shut. Clark removed the irons and Clay followed the lawmen and a guard into the warden's office. The warden was a small, wiry looking man. He got up and shook hands with the sheriff and took the commitment papers. He sat down again, reading.

"The great Clay Burch, eh?" he said. "Well, son, you can forget that you ever had a name. From now on you're just a number. You look strong and able-bodied. Life in the great outdoors, eh? Well, we try to make our boys happy here, so you'll be in the great outdoors. Texas has a lot of roads to build and you're going to help build them for the next twenty-five or thirty years. All right, sheriff, we'll take care of him."

Clark came over and shook hands. He wagged his great shaggy head in sorrow. "I'm shore sorry about it, Clay. You know that. If there's anything I can ever do for you, just let me know."

"Thanks, Bill, but I don't expect there is. So long, and good luck."

Clay shook hands with Sonny and the other deputy and they went out again; out into the open air where a man was free. Clay followed a trusty down a long hallway and came out into the prison yard where convicts in striped suits were strolling—the older men who couldn't work.

"Fish!" jeered a voice as Clay followed the guard. "Fresh fish!" followed by coarse laughter and cat calls.

"What are you in for, Peckerwood?"

"How's life on the outside, Peckerwood?"

"Where you f'um, Peckerwood?"

"How many did the judge say, Peckerwood?"

"Fish! Fresh fish!" the voice jeered again.

The elderly trusty grinned at Clay. "Don't pay no 'tention to them, Peckerwood," he said. "It's about the only fun they git, hollerin' at the new fish. In that door there."

XII

MADE of iron and heavily barred, the door was in a low commissary building. Right above the roof, on the walls, was a large kiosk in whose shade two guards in big hats and riding boots sat down with Winchesters handy, looking over the strolling men in the yard. Clay entered a room with a counter and shelves, back of it. The shelves were loaded with striped garments and shoes that looked iron hard.

"Got another customer fer you, Joe," the trusty said.

"What are you in for?" Clay asked as a broken toothed man came forward.

"Murder. I killed my wife. Thirteen years so far. I only got eighty-six more to do."

Joe said to Clay, "Go over there and take off your clothes," and indicated a chair.

Clay slid out of his clothes, removing his handmade boots. He laid them on the counter. "What happens to them?" he asked.

Joe was examining the boots. He looked at Clay and grinned his broken toothed smile. "The trustees sell 'em and your clothes in town an' we split the money. Some cow puncher will get a good

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bargain in these. Here," and he slid two striped shirts across the counter, at least two sizes too large. Pants followed; black and white lateral stripes.

"Haven't you got some a little smaller?" Clay asked.

Joe looked at the other trusty and groaned. "I keep tellin' 'em month after month that our tailer was paroled an' we cain't give special fits. But they allus keep askin' anyhow. Take 'em, con!" he snarled and flung the shoes after them.

Clay finished dressing in the coarse prison cloth and went into another room where a convict-barber clipped his head as close as the scissors would allow. From there he went into another room where the number of the former "owner" of the clothes was brushed out with white paint and his own new number was to be substituted. The trusty with him handed the man a slip of paper received from the warden's office. On it was written the number 23641.

Clay Burch, convict. No, just Convict number 23641.

He went from there to his cell in the "fish" quarters and was locked up.

He was loaded into another wire covered van the next morning, along with four other men. A giant Negro called Big Sam, who had killed another Negro over a girl; a small, wiry looking Negro doing twenty years for armed robbery; a slim, intelligent looking Mexican, Cardinez, doing life for murder; and a buck-toothed, sloping shouldered cow puncher-turned-horsethief whose nickname actually *was* Peckerwood.

"What are you in for?" Clay asked the Mexican as the mules plodded into motion.

"I gat into trawble with a freen over a gorl," Cardinez smiled. "I keel him with a 'nife. In my contree nobody no pay attention. But these Gringos skonks they put me in jail. I gonna ezkape an' go back to my contree."

Big Sam laughed uproariously. "Listen, boy, you ain't goin' nowhere. I did a year in one of these road camps awhile back for breakin' a man's jaw with a monkey wrench. I know what it is. You ain't goin' anywhere until you do yo' time. Let me give you boys some advice from a man what knows the ropes. When we git to this road camp, you keeps yo' eyes open an' yo' mouf Borden, the head guard. He's big an' he's shut, an' yo' watches out foah Captain mean."

Clay instinctively liked Big Sam and the smiling Mexican. The other two appeared to be sullen, morose, and stupid. At noon they ate the dry sandwiches while the guard in high heeled boots and big hat lounged nearby with a carbine over one arm. He let them drink from the water keg, ordered them back into the wire cage, locked the door at the rear, and climbed up beside the trusty driver again. The mules plodded on.

Late in the afternoon they passed men in stripes handling teams pulling scrapers and big plows while others grubbed mesquites. Just before sundown they arrived at a collection of run-down shacks inside a high wire enclosure, with stables for the work teams outside.

A guard swung back the high wire gate and the van entered. There had been a rain the night before and the ground was still a bit muddy. The lock rattled and they got out. A big pot-bellied man in his forties, massively built, sat on a horse with a coiled blacksnake whip in his hand. He lifted it and got down slowly, deliberately.

"Captain Borden," whispered Big Sam's voice. "Watch out, boy."

Borden came up, the whip coiled in a massive paw. He looked them over, all five of them, one at a time from a pair of narrow, mean eyes, and Clay would have sworn he had been drinking.

Another man had come up. He looked crisp and businesslike. Clay thought it was the warden until the man, also looking them over, spoke.

"Those three look pretty good," he said, indicating Big Sam, Cardinez, and Clay. "But these other two," jerking his head toward the cow puncher and the small Negro, "How the devil can I make any money building roads when the warden keeps sending me men down here who can't even earn their keep?"

BORDEN was still looking over the five men. His glance settled on Clay.

"What are you down here for?" he asked softly.

"Bank robbery," Clay answered.

The whip uncoiled and lashed out like lightning. It cut a streak of fire across Clay's back.

"When you speak to me," he said, "you take off your straw hat and say, 'Captain, sir.' So I'll ask you again: what are you down here for?"

"I just told you, CAPTAIN SIR!"

"Take off that striped shirt and pull

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down your pants and lay down on your face," Borden ordered.

"You take 'em off," Clay Burch said.

A blow caught him from behind; the blow of a rifle barrel glancing off his head, expertly done. Clay went down and felt his shirt being yanked off by Big Sam; felt the big Negro jerking down his trousers. The lash of the whip began. It cut deep at first and then less deep as the sweet feeling of unconsciousness began to come over him. He half rolled over on his side, spitting out the mouthful of Texas mud into which he had bitten. Borden was speaking.

"I can pick out the tough ones first glance. But he won't be tough any more. Well, Sam, I see you're back with us. What are you down here for, Peckerwood?"

"Me, Captain, sir, I'm down here to build roads—to work mighty hard," Sam said with a laugh.

Captain Borden laughed too. "That's the right answer, Sam. You learned that the first time."

"I sure did, Captain, sir," Big Sam grinned.

"All right. Pick him up and take him over to Number Three. It's over there."

Clay found himself lifted in the massive black arms, carried like a baby. He heard Sam's voice in a whisper. "It's all right, boy. You had to learn the hard way. You can get by now, long's you work hard an' show the proper manners."

The giant Negro carried him to a building with a row of straw covered bunks running the length of each wall. Sam put him into the straw and then bent down and picked up a three foot length of chain bolted to the bunk. It had a shackle on it. He snapped the shackle on Clay's ankle.

"I'll take the one next to you," he whispered. "We'll get that Mexican on the other side of you. He looks like a good boy. That other fella an' that cow puncher are plain trash. The kind who'll squeal on you boy. So keep away from 'em. The work gangs will be in purty soon and I know some of the long termers. I'll soon tell you who you can trust an' who you cain't."

Clay was learning fast.

He lay there on his stomach, the shackle around his right ankle, fire in his lacerated back and buttocks. He thought of Doc and Eddie and Mike and Joe—free down in Arizona to start their lives anew. He thought of Kitty too. She was with them.

They had breakfast the next morning, sitting in rows at long tables of rough board and eating unsugared corn meal mush, salt pork, corn bread, and drinking scalding black coffee bitter as vinegar. They went out three miles in wagons with armed guards riding horses and with the ever present carbines slung over their arms.

Sam was given a grubbing hoe and ax and spade from the implement wagon. He passed them along to Clay and got more for himself and Cardinez. They went to work in the mesquites a quarter of a mile ahead of the teams, grubbing down deep and cutting the roots two feet below the ground. The trees were piled on the prairie until dry and then burned. Big Sam stripped off his striped prison shirt as the morning wore on, his giant, ebony torso gleaming in the sun.

"Looks better," he advised. "Looks like you're workin' so hard you got to cool off. The guards don't watch a man so close when he's got his shirt off."

Clay promptly removed his own shirt, his sore, lacerated back now blue from the lashes of the blacksnake whip. He felt pain with every movement that first day, but he doggedly grubbed away with the hoe, getting down to bared roots.

At noon the cook wagon served them red beans, boiled potatoes, corn bread and buttermilk during a thirty-minute rest period. It was a twelve-hour-day and the guards saw to it that there were no slackers. The guards ate by turns at another wagon with the contractor—his name was Kearney—beans, fried potatoes, boiled beef, coffee and pie.

Through political connections Kearney got the contracts to build state roads. He then paid the state fifty cents a day and keep for convict labor, making enormous profits. Some of these profits then were split with the politicians who had swung the deal for Kearney.

It was a nice setup, Clay learned that first day. Texas got its roads built by convict labor and was happy. The contractor and politicians raked in their huge profits and also were happy. Clay went on back to work. Cardinez and Big Sam worked with him.

"We cain't be too friendly durin' workin' hours," Big Sam explained that

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afternoon as they stood gulping big dippers of water from the water boy's pail. "Guards got a way of watchin' men who get too friendly an' bunch up. So just take your time, boys, an' try to look like yo'-all's workin'. Gimme a week here an' I'll know more about this place than the warden an' Captain Borden—watch out, boys, here he comes now!"

Big Sam grabbed the grubbing hoe and vigorously attacked the ground around a big mesquite tree. The hoe tore great bites out of the earth as Borden rode up and swung down. He lumbered over ponderously, blacksnake in hand and the smell of whisky raw on his breath.

Clay was on his knees, shoveling loose dirt out of a hole around a mesquite's bared roots, his lacerated back bare.

"How's it going, Peckerwood?" Borden asked Big Sam.

SAM stood up and removed his prison straw hat, wiping at his face to remove sweat where there was no sweat. "Goin' good, Captain, sir. A few more weeks an' we gonna git this road built."

"That's fine, Sam," the head guard said easily. "You look like you've been working hard, but I know you too well. Better go down and get yourself a drink of water. We don't want to be too hard on you boys. Take your ax along and get it sharpened."

"Thank you, Captain, sir. I'll go right down."

Big Sam left in a hurry. Borden waddled over to Cardinez who was working ten feet distant. "That ax you're using looks dull," he said. "Go down to the tool wagon and get it filed. You can't cut mesquite roots with a dull ax."

"*Si.*"

"Call me Captain, sir," Borden ordered.

Cardinez shrugged his slim shoulders. "*No comprendo. No entiendo, señor.*" He spread out his hands in an expansive gesture. He didn't comprehend or understand what the other was saying.

"*Alli!*" (There!) bellowed the guard captain, pointing down the slope with his coiled whip. "Take that ax and get it sharpened, you grinning ape." He salted with a string of oaths.

"*Si,* señor," and Cardinez went away with the ax over one shoulder, still grinning. "Beeg stuff," he said to himself, still grinning.

Borden came over to where Clay was working. He got off his knees and removed his straw hat.

"That's all right, Burch," the other said. "I just had to let you know who's boss around here. Sit down and rest a bit. I'm not as bad a man as some of these ratty cons will tell you. So you're in for cracking nineteen banks?"

"I'm in to work," Clay said.

Borden laughed at that one. "You're learning fast. I like that. There's angles a man soon learns in here that can make things a lot easier for him. You ask Sam. I read your record in the camp warden's office. Nineteen banks. You must have piled up quite a bit of money on that spree."

"A little," Clay admitted cautiously.

"Got it all buried out, hey?"

"Some of it."

"And there's more warrants waiting for you when you get out, too."

"I might be able to return most of the money, or I might be able to bust out," Clay said coldly, flatly. He was living in the vain hope that Clark could do something about getting his sentence cut, that his lawyer could get him a parole in a few years if promise of restitution was made. That was his ace-in-the hole. Stick it out for awhile and then use all the money he had saved to make good.

"Maybe you could bust out, but it ain't been done much," Borden said, removing his hat and mopping at his broad forehead with a bandanna. "Take a look out there. Armed guards on foot, watching the boys and seeing that they keep busy. More guards on horseback forming an outside circle. Bloodhounds tied near a fast hack, in case some of the boys might slip off through the mesquites. You haven't got a chance."

"I don't want to try it," Clay Burch said, and picked up the spade again. "As soon as I get permission to write a letter, I'm going to have the sheriff who caught me start making good with some of the money I stole."

"*Hmmm.* I see." The narrow eyes were cold, shrewd, calculating. "How much?"

"About a hundred thousand," Clay lied. "It'll keep."

"It'll have to keep a long time, boy," Borden said.

Borden mounted. Clay knew, as he resumed work, that the man's greedy eyes were playing speculatively over him. Borden rode off and Clay Burch,

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convicted bank robber, went back to his spading, nursing a back cut to pieces with a blacksnake whip.

He was allowed to write one letter a month, and the first went to Kitty, in care of "Specs" Boggs, in Yucca City. He tried to word it so that there would be no suspicion that she was anybody but a girl he had met and that Specs was a newspaperman he had met. He knew that Borden would read the letter.

It brought no answer, and he guessed that she was afraid to write. Or had she realized the hopelessness of their situation and put him out of her life? If it was to be that way, he somehow didn't blame her. The judge had said not less than twenty-five years—and Texas had a lot of roads to build. She would be fifty-seven years old when he finished his minimum sentence. Clay went back at the mesquites, savagely, and wrote his next letter to Bill Clark. He told Bill that he wanted to make restitution to as many banks as possible with his share of the proceeds from the holdups, and that if Bill would come to the camp, Clay would draw him maps and show where various parts of the money was buried.

This one too brought no answer—something that puzzled Clay. He knew the old sheriff too well. Bill was honest, and he'd jump at the chance to help Clay pay back the share of the loot he'd taken from the banks.

But no answer.

THE months rolled past. One upon the other endlessly. Clay did get one letter from his mother, who was back out west now. It was kind and considerate and said that if he ever got out he would have a home with her and her husband. She realized he had done what he believed was right in that first bank holdup.

Clay left his grubbing hoe and spade and ax and got "promoted" to skinning four mules on a big plow. Big Sam handled the plow cutting furrows two feet deep; and Cardinez, skinning four more on a scraper, scooped up the loose earth and put it on the grade while his black eyes always watched the massive figure of Guard Captain Borden.

"Beeg cheese," he said.

Cold weather set in that fall, after the usual hoped for rains. The road gang of convicts moved their camp and worked on. Big Sam worked the plow handles and Cardinez still skinned his four to a scraper. Clay wrote his letters—letters to which he never received answers. And all the time he knew that Captain Borden's eyes were watching him, shrewdly and speculatively. He had begun to do Clay small favors that first year, while, in turn, he cut to ribbons the backs of a hundred convicts.

But the hoped for trusty job never came.

"I'm getting tired of this job," he said to Clay one summer day as they stood resting the four sweaty mules. Big Sam had gone after a drink of water. The two men were alone. "I'm thinking of quitting and settling down some place in Arizony. Sounds like a good place."

"So I've heard," Clay said.

"You ought to know," Borden grinned. "You robbed banks there, and you wrote a letter to a gal who never answered it."

'Maybe she didn't get it," Clay suggested.

Borden grinned and ran a hand over his big jowls. "Maybe she didn't," he said. "But we got in a new man yesterday from down there. Got into trouble in Texas over horse stealing and wound up here. Cowpuncher. He was telling me about it—place called Yucca City."

Clay was lean and gaunt now, the first touch of gray already appearing at his temples. Worry, hard work, and poor food had done that. He was breaking fast. He went cold at Borden's words. Was it the truth? Was it coincidence or did Borden know something about Doc and Eddie and the others? And why—there were a thousand whys now flooding his mind.

"Don't work too hard." Borden grinned and went to his horse.

XIII

IT WAS noon of the next day. Clay got his food from the cookwagon and settled down, sitting cross-legged, cowpuncher style, plate across his crossed legs, buttermilk cup on the grass beside him. A man strolled over and sat beside him. He took up a similar position. He was about five feet four, with dark hair, and looked as wiry as rawhide leather. He went to work eating, chuckwagon style, and finally looked up.

"You're Clay Burch, ain't you?" he asked. "Up for bank robbery."

"I'm Burch," Clay said shortly. He

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spoke in clipped sentences now. He was becoming hard and cold, and suspicious of all men except Big Sam and Cardinez. These two he trusted.

"I'm Pee-Wee Knight. Five years for horse stealing. I heard a lot about you and that trial. Didn't think much about it until somebody said your girl had gone to a place called Yucca City, Arizona. So it just happens that, Arizona bein' my stampin' ground, I've been there a lot of times. I was there a short time before I went over into Texas and stole that hoss and ended up here."

"Yea?" Clay said coldly. Maybe this man was up for horse stealing and maybe he was a bounty hunter or a Pinkerton man trying to find out where some stolen bank money was buried.

"Yea," Pee-Wee said, and laughed. "Shucks, Burch, you don't have to be afraid of me. I just thought maybe I could give you some information you'd like to know."

"I don't want it," grunted Clay. "Save your breath."

"All right," shrugged Pee-Wee and finished eating.

Clay went back to work, burning with a desire to find out what the little puncher knew. But he was afraid. He put the thought from his mind as much as possible.

They went in that night, put away the teams, and were herded inside the enclosure to wash up at a big trough and go eat supper. Clay strolled over to the building where he was housed. He had helped move it three times, jacking it up on wheels. He went in to the place, the first one back from supper, and saw the new man laying on the straw bunk, his right ankle shackled. He strolled over and looked down.

"Hello, Boyd," he said softly.

Boyd Arnst looked up in amazement, then uneasiness. "Why — uh — Clay! Well, I'll be darned! Who'd a ever thought I'd run into you here—say, look, Clay, I hope there ain't any hard feelin's about that little mix-up in Cedar City. I shore didn't aim to hit you. I was sort of shootin' to warn you."

"Shut up, Boyd," Clay said tonelessly. "Stop your whining. You did me a favor.

"If it hadn't been for you getting so drunk and getting buck fever over that reward, they'd have got us all. You let the rest of my men get away, so I'm not kicking. Forget it."

"Well, that's plumb white of you, Clay." Boyd swallowed in obvious relief. "That's fine. Maybe we can bust out of here and I can join up with your bunch, eh? Shore, we'll plan an' bust out. I cain't stand it here."

"You won't break out and you will stand it. What are you in for?"

"Well, it's like this," Boyd whined. "I'd been down sick an' couldn't work. My stomach was botherin me. Nobody would give me a job after they found out about me shootin' you with a rifle. I couldn't git a job *anywhere* an' I was sick. I had to do somethin', didn't I? So one night when my stomach was botherin' me I went down to Marcos's grocery store an'—well, I'd done some work fer him one time anyhow an' that cheap Mexican didn't pay me near as much wages as he should have. He owed me money."

"Cut it out, Boyd," Clay grunted sourly. "You were too lazy to do anything except loaf in your house and mooch drinks in the barrooms. So you went down and robbed Marcos's store at night to get some groceries and maybe what cash he had left in the till. What did the judge say?"

"He said I was a no-account."

"How long have you got to do?" Clay asked harshly.

"Three years. It was all that ole Bill Clark's fault. People just wouldn't let him retire after he caught you. They made him stay right in for at least one more term. So he come right over to the house next day, him an' Sonny!"

"And found it filled with groceries and you with money in your pocket. All right, Boyd. Let it go. And now let me give you a little advice. Keep your mouth shut down here and don't whine about your troubles to men who have more than you've got. They're not interested. When a guard yells at you, you jump. Have you seen Captain Borden, the head guard yet?"

"Uh-uh."

"All right. Good. He was probably out with the men. He'll spot you tomorrow, because he knows the face of every one of these cons here. When he walks up with that blacksnake whip in his hand and asks you what you're down here for you take off that straw hat and tell him you're down here to work—and you address him as 'Captain, sir.' If you don't, he'll cut you to pieces with a whip. I know because I've got scars on my own

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back. The Texas politicians might not have enough money to hire men to build roads, but these same politicians have got plenty of money to buy blacksnake whips. That's about all. Keep your mouth shut, your ears open, and jump when they tell you to jump."

HE GOT up and went back to his bunk.

"Hey," called Boyd weakly, "how come they put this thing on my leg? When do they take me over to supper? I'm hungry."

Clay laughed out loud, the first time in months. "You'll have that on your leg until five o'clock in the morning. Captain Borden believes in breaking them in right. You won't get anything to eat until breakfast. Kearney, the contractor of convicts, believes in saving money."

Big Sam and the others began to come in and they started a poker game, playing for matches. Pee-Wee had found a bunk next to Cardinez. Clay watched the little man that night and he watched him in the weeks that followed. Cardinez liked the little puncher, but Clay was still suspicious until he got Big Sam's okay.

"I had one of the trusties in the camp warden's office go through the records while the Big Boy was in town," he said. "That Pee-Wee boy ain't no bounty hunter or Pinkerton man, Clay. He's doin' his five years for horse stealin', all right; and you know sumpin'? I kinda like the li'l old white boy. He ain't much on size but he kin shuah handle a scraper."

That was good enough for Clay. If Big Sam said that Pee-Wee Knight was okay, then it was so. Big Sam knew more of what was going on in the camp than any man in it, including the warden and Captain Borden. Next day Clay ate beside Pee-Wee.

"About Yucca City, Pee-Wee," he said. "You were there?"

Pee-Wee Knight laughed. "So you finally decided I'm all right, eh? Okay, Clay. I was wondering how long it would be before you came around. Yes, your girl is there. I saw her at a dance one night with some newspaper feller named Specs. I got scratched a bit with a knife and a medic named Tweed fixed me up. Nice feller. Just got married. But I'd been readin' plenty about you in the papers—about how you had a doctor and a lawyer and a newspaper feller in your gang, along with a liveryman named Joe somethin' or other. I started nosin' around."

"Go on," Clay said quietly. "I'm listening, Pee-Wee."

"I finally figgered it out. This Tweed—a blonde, easy goin' feller—was really Doc Peterson of your gang. This Specs feller with this girl Kitty was Eddie McCarthy, another right bower of yourn. And some feller who hung around with them—seems like he worked in a bank—was Mike what's-his-name."

Clay was bent over his plate. "Good guess, Pee-Wee. What about Joe and Bart?"

The little man shook his head. "Didn't meet 'em. But I'll bet they're around there some'ers."

Clay got up. The food, rotten though it was, palatable though it might be to hungry men, had lost its taste. The bright-eyed Pee-Wee got up with him.

Clay went over and dumped the battered tin plate and cup into a wash tub half filled with warm water, held out his knife, fork, and spoon to the guard, and tossed them in as the guard watched. Every utensil had to be accounted for. But in spite of that and periodic search of the men and bunks, knives, forks and spoons had a way of disappearing, along with files from the implement wagon.

They came in that night to unharness and Pee-Wee helped Clay. They were both tired, and so were the four mules. "So they're your old bunch?" the little man asked.

"Yep," Clay said.

"Figure on goin' down to join 'em again one of these days?"

Clay felt himself begin to freeze. Pee-Wee chuckled. Big Sam had stripped the harness and collars from two mules and stood with the gear over a massive arm. It was getting a bit cold now and the coarse, hard prison shoes never seemed to keep their feet warm unless they were working.

Pee-Wee said, "Aw, Clay, I ain't buttin' in on your personal affairs. Them things are private. I just thought that maybe I'll be leavin' tomorrow and you could come along."

Big Sam rattled the harness to cover the sound of his words. "You ain't goin' anywhere, boy. That break is gonna be a bust."

"Break?" Clay asked the big Negro in surprise.

Big Sam nodded. "You oughta circu-

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late more wif the boys, Clay, and learn things stid of stickin' by yo' ownself so much. Six of the fellers are makin' the try at noon tomorrow, just when we unhook for dinner."

"Seven," Pee-Wee grinned. "I'm invitin' myself along fer the trip."

"You ain't goin' to do no such fool thing, boy. I ain't gonna let you git yo-self shot up or brought back foah the water treatment. I don't wanta see you-all tied up by yo' thumbs while Borden pours water down you till you bust. I don't want you-all to have yo' head held in a barrel of rain water till you begin to drown. You ain't goin' no place tomorrer."

"What's up, Sam?" Clay asked.

"Borden knows."

"I see. You warning them?"

"I'm keepin' my big black mouf shut, boy. It's their ownself's business, not mine. But there ain't much goin' on in this heah camp I don't knows about. So when we git ready to unhitch tomorrer to take the teams to the feed waggins, you wanta to git them trace chains unhooked faster than you ever done before an' git goin' toward them waggins. Them guards has got exter ca't'idges an' are goin' to shoot any con who even looks cross-eyed at 'em. I told you-all, Borden knows!"

THAT was all that was said. They put away the harness, watered and fed the tired mules, and then they themselves were herded inside the enclosure to wash up in the cold and eat supper in the grubby messhall where the smoky kerosene lamps showed rows of men in stripes humped noisily over plates of greasy beans, salt pork, and cornbread. Kearney fed his men just enough to keep them working and pocketed the rest of the food allowance.

They went from the messhall to the ill smelling straw bunks and blankets and Clay sat down on his bunk, Cardinez beside him. Big Sam faced them from his own bunk, Pee-Wee lounging and smoking beneath his blankets to keep warm. The low clapboard building had but one stove, and it was at the far end from them. Near it a group of men played cards for matches, and their laughter was a little too loud. The buck-toothed puncher Peckerwood was with them, and so was Boyd Arnst. Boyd's attempts to make friends with Clay and the three others had finally ended in frustration. He and Peckerwood now were cronies.

"Peckerwood and Boyd goin' with 'em?" Clay asked Sam, low voiced.

"That's what they're figgerin', I reckon," Big Sam said. His eyes above the cupped match in his hands were two bright black diamonds.

Clay glanced down the line of bunks. The group were still laughing as they played cards, but Clay could sense the false notes in it—the same undercurrent of tenseness he had known just before they were ready to ride in and swing down before a bank. A tenseness he hadn't known for a long time came now. He was astonished at how the hard work and freedom from the old strain made him sleep so soundly nights.

"Rusty is leadin' 'em," Big Sam said.

Clay looked at Rusty, a vicious desperado and murderer, doing life for the murder of a fifteen-year-old Mexican girl. Cholo was a scar-faced Mexican, as dark of face as the now thoughtful little Negro who had come in with Clay. The other cons were of about the same stripe. Small wonder, Clay thought, that Borden had found out. Any time a gang like that one got together, it meant scheming and planning.

"Who squawked to Borden?" Clay asked.

"Peckerwood. I tol' you when we come in not to trust him. I kin spot the squealers the minute I sets eyes on 'em. He's hopin' to get a soft trusty job. Borden promised it to 'im."

They played cards for awhile and presently the door at the opposite end from the stove opened and a burly guard entered.

"All right, get into your bunks and snap on them shackles," he called. "Hurry it up. Get them leg irons on."

The men meandered to their bunks and sat down, making coarse jokes as they picked up the shackles with the three-foot-length of chain bolted to the bunks and put them on. The chain enabled them to roll over in their sleep and keep covered up. Clay put on the iron, noting the scar tissue already forming a white ring around his leg. The guard, armed only with a wooden billy, came down the line and inspected each ankle. He blew out the lamps and opened the door.

"I don't want to hear one sound out of this bunkhouse tonight," he said harshly, as he did every night. "I hear any loud

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talkin' or laughin', I'll be back in here and somebody will get a head cracked."

He went out, the padlock and chain rattled, and the tired men who normally fell promptly asleep from twelve hours of hard work now lay there and talked in sibilant whispers. You couldn't keep word of a break from spreading. Everybody in the bunkhouse knew.

They went back on the job in the chill of the following morning and nothing unusual seemed to be amiss. The sun was out, there was no wind, and it grew warm as the morning progressed. Clay skinned his team and watched the guards. They rode as usual while the massive figure of Captain Borden went jogging along, making the usual rounds. The sun went higher and noon approached. Clay watched Rusty, the Mexican they called "Cholo," and the wiry little Negro. The Negro and Peckerwood were working a one team slip, with Boyd just behind them. Clay saw Rusty begin to unhitch and Big Sam almost leaped at the trace chains.

"Git outa here quick, boy," he whispered. "Here it comes! There goes that trashy little fella an' Cholo to talk to the nearest guard. Let's git outa heah!"

A certain wariness had come over the guard. He sat his horse from a distance of ten feet, and the stock of his carbine resting on the saddle. The carbine was cocked, barrel pointing up. The Negro was whining to him, his straw hat off. Then the sun glinted on a bright object as Cholo threw the file-knife. The razor honed weapon caught the guard squarely in the stomach, eight inches of bright steel buried to the hilt.

XIV

LETTING out a scream, the guard toppled from the horse and the carbine went off. Cholo was on the dropped gun in a flash as the Negro grabbed the reins of the horse. The Mexican spun and shot another guard dead, grabbed up his knife, and leaped for the horse where the Negro already was up in the saddle. Cholo took time to lever two more shots and killed a second guard. Then he was up in a bound, back of the Negro. Winchesters began to pop and Clay saw men up on harnessed mules, spurring away, saw a frightened, white-faced Peckerwood running on foot for the wagons. Peckerwood was scared.

Clay and Big Sam whipped the four mules into a trot and ran toward the wagons.

The popping of Winchesters faded into the distance, along with the sounds of shouts and running horses. Armed guards ringed the remaining men in a mounted circle, guns cocked and ready. Borden came loping up on a sweaty horse and looked down at Clay.

"Burch, you and Sam hook up to that wagon in a hurry and follow me. Hurry it up!"

They hurried it up and loped out across the flat with Borden galloping beside them.

Clay saw the Negro first. He lay sprawled face down in the dirt, still breathing but gasping out his last few breaths. There was blood all over the back of his striped shirt.

"It sort of looks," Clay said to Big Sam, "as though Cholo figured two were too many for that horse and stabbed the black boy from behind."

"That ain't no gunshot wound, all right," Big Sam agreed. "Look at the way that shirt is cut. A six-inch slash. That Cholo boy has been workin' on that file for three months, Ah reckon."

Borden had hauled up. "Load him in," he ordered. "Then come on over here."

They jumped down and the Negro gasped out the rest of his life as they laid him in the wagon bed. Sam took the lines and they walked the wagon over to where Cholo lay. He had been shot squarely through the back of the head by a 44-40 in the hands of a guard. They picked up the dead guards next.

Rusty had gotten three hundred yards before a hard-spurring guard had caught up with the mule and shot him twice with a repeater. He was badly wounded but not fatally.

Boyd and the others had, temporarily at least, gained their freedom.

Clay and Big Sam loaded the cursing, groaning girl-murderer into the wagon and drove him back to camp, along with the bodies of the others. Work was halted for that day while Rusty was bandaged up and graves dug for the others. Captain Borden read the burial services from a Bible in the absence of the camp warden, who was in town.

"Beeg fat-head," came Cardinez' low whisper as he stood beside Clay with head bared.

They went back to their bunks and the next day Peckerwood was given a

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soft trusty job of cleaning up Borden's desk and office and tending the fires. This was on a Thursday. On Sunday morning, after church services, Borden returned to his office.

Peckerwood was lying face down in a pool of blood atop Borden's big desk. His head had almost been severed with a single stroke of a big knife.

Big Sam was grinning that night. "It looks lak Borden have to git himself new spy in Number Three."

Noise had come from without. Sam got up and went to the door. He came back in a few minutes and grinned again.

"They jest brought in Boyd an' dem other boys."

Nobody made a move to get up and go look again. It wasn't healthy, if you were seen.

"What'll they do with them?" Clay asked.

"Right now," Big Sam said casually, "Borden figgers dem boys might be thirsty after sech a long ride. He's leadin' 'em over to the water barrel to gib 'em all drink. A real big drink."

The winter broke and they moved the entire camp another ten miles east. Clay did his work, aware that Borden was watching him—and waiting. Clay waited too.

He was much older looking now and much thinner; that was what the long hours and the poor food had done. His hair was beginning to become gray at the temples. He was allowed to shave once each Sunday morning, but he had grown himself a heavy blonde mustache of the kind Joe had worn. They had taken Rusty back to the penitentiary, as soon as he was up and around, and hanged him. Clay wrote his letters to Bill Clark, again making offers to return all the money he had buried, and again there were no answers.

He toiled through all that terrible summer, saw another attempt to escape end in death for one man; and again he saw the three who were recaptured brought back in chains, lashed, beaten, given the water treatment, and half starved.

CLAY himself got it that fall for a minor breach of the iron rules. He was hung up by his thumbs and lashed until half unconscious, then Borden started pouring the water down his throat as he hung until Clay's inner organs began to swell and more pain wrenched at him from within. When he strangled Borden had him cut down until he could regain his breath. Then the massive hands seized him and shoved his head deep into the waters of the rain barrel.

He knew what Borden wanted. The man was playing with him as a cat plays with a mouse before devouring it. Borden was breaking his body and his spirit. He wanted Clay's gold. He was softening him up to get it.

He let Clay sweat it out for another year, using every devilish device in his brutal brain to make it tough; and Clay Burch suffered them all.

By now Pee-Wee was one of them. They made up the four; Clay, Big Sam, the ever smiling Cardinez, and the little puncher. So Clay sweated it out, growing more gray, more silent than ever, thinner as the months went by, his back now a mass of scar tissue. The long years were tallying up. But Borden was a patient man.

The third year the Guard Captain changed his tactics. He began to do Clay small favors. The latrines Clay had been forced to clean out after dark while the others were in their bunks now were a thing of the past. He got soft jobs and better food. He was put in charge of the milking crew and allowed all the fresh milk he could steal. He drank it by the gallon. Borden was building him up with kindness.

Clay knew it. He knew it the day the captain of the guards finally sent for him.

It was on a Sunday afternoon and the camp warden was gone, which was a good deal of the time. The two men were alone. There was a bottle of whisky on the desk and Borden waved a massive paw toward it.

"Sit down, Burch," he invited genially. "Have yourself a drink."

"Thanks," Clay declined. "But I never was a drinking man and I'm afraid my stomach won't take it any more."

"Look here, Burch, why don't you get some sense, boy? You ain't got a chance of gettin' out of here, because I'm watching you special. If you'd a played ball with me you'd be a trusty now in the warden's office, the softest job in the place. But you're too stubborn. I can be a reasonable man if I'm treated right."

"I'm listening," Clay said.

"Burch, I want my share of that hold-

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up money you've got hid away."

"An escape for me?" Clay asked, his heart pounding.

Borden grinned and shook his head, pouring himself another drink. "Oh, no, boy! I ain't gettin' no shot in the back to pay for the lashings and water treatments you got. Not until I've got my share. Then we'll talk about it, though I'm promisin' nothing. And don't get any fool ideas about escaping. You can't—you can bet your life on that. That money is useless to you because the way you're going down you won't last any twenty-five years. You won't last another five."

"But I wanted to pay back the banks as much as my share would allow," Clay said. "I wrote the sheriff who captured me to that effect. I've somehow got a hunch he never received those letters."

"He didn't," Borden grinned. "Neither did your gal down in Yucca City, Arizona. I saw to that. Only the letters you writ your mother got through me. So you won't play ball with me, eh?"

"I'll stick it out," Clay said stubbornly. "I've still got faith in Bill Clark, the man who caught me. He'll get me out some day."

Borden grinned thinly. "No, he won't. Kearney, the contractor for you cons, is payin' part of his profits to the Governor and has a lot of influence. I've got your record marked down as bad—incorrigible. Beatings, extra duty, and even water treatments to keep you in line. You'll never be paroled. But that's not all, Burch. I ain't the fool you think I am. You think I'm just a big hunk of muscle who's handy with a blacksnake whip. I got brains, boy. I knowed that the rest of your bunch got away and were never caught. But I figgered that maybe your gal in Yucca City, Arizona, might know where they were. So I hired a man to go down there and live for a few months and watch her. You'd like to know what she's doin', now wouldn't you? Maybe she's eatin' her heart out for you an' waitin'. Maybe she's gone to another town an' forgot you. Maybe she's married. You'd like to know, but you ain't goin' to find out. All you're goin' to find out is that I know your old gang of outlaws are all living in Yucca City under assumed names."

HE laughed and leaned back in the chair, Clay sat woodenly.

"But," went on Borden, "I'm a reasonable man. I'm not a bounty hunter, Burch. I know you want to protect them. But I'm taking a month's vacation pretty soon to look over the Arizona country. So why should I turn bounty hunter and collect about four or five thousand in rewards when for about ten thousand you could protect them? All you'd have to do is draw me a map, showing me where some of that money is buried. Then your old outlaw bunch would be safe. See how simple it is?"

Clay studied the massive face, the heavy belly, the clean jowls, shaven by a convict barber-trusty. He saw the mustache below the bulbous nose, the whisky glass in the huge paw that had wielded the blacksnake so many times across his back.

Out in the compound there was a hot baseball game going on, the yells of the men coming in through the open window. Big Sam was pitching and Big Sam was striking them out right and left. The opposing batters simply couldn't hit those sizzling balls with the flat board bats. Pee-wee was playing third base, bouncing up and down while he pounded a hand into a work glove.

"Burn 'em down, boy, burn 'em down!" he was yelling excitedly.

Cardinez sat cross-legged on the ground among the spectators. "Thees beisbol is one fool game," he said to the man beside him. "Me—I like the bool fighting. Ahhh—the bool fights!"

In the office Clay Burch said hoarsely, "All right. Give me a piece of paper and I'll draw you a map."

He had to protect Doc and Eddie and Mike and Joe, and even Bart.

They had ridden with him, shared his dangers. They had followed blindly his leadership.

They were still his wild bunch.

XV

SLOWLY, reluctantly, Clay wrote the name of the town on the paper and then drew a map, with explicit directions as to where Borden should dig. The head guard put the paper in his vest pocket and poured himself another drink. He was pleased and smiling; in fine fettle.

"I was leaving next week and thought you'd come around," he said. "Of course, Burch, you understand that this is for one year only. You're just paying ten thousand for one year's protection of

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your old bunch—buying time for them as long as your money holds out. I hope for their sake that it holds out. I'll see you next year."

Clay told Big Sam, Cardinez, and Pee-Wee about it that night. "If there was only some way I could warn them. But Borden reads all my monthly letters."

Big Sam laughed his white toothed Negro grin. "You want to warn them? Shucks, boy, that's easy. I can write a letter to my wife."

"I thought you were in for killing another man over a girl."

"Thass true. Thass every bit true, Clay. But I still got a wife. If you want to send out a message I kin do it easy."

"How?" Clay asked curiously.

"Nothin' to it, boy. I'm on kitchen duty next week while you got charge of the milkin' crew. They bring that milk in at night an' the next mornin' all the cream is done floated up to the top for the guards to use in their mush. I write a letter to my wife. Then I dip a pen in that cream an' write between the lines. My wife she gits that letter an' the first thing she does is put a hot flat iron on it. That flat iron scorches that cream an', boy, you got the prettiest brown ink writin' you ever saw—right between the lines. I'll write the letter to my wife an' you write in between the lines. You tell her where you want it to go an' it'll go. Nothin' to it."

Clay thought for a moment and then shook his head. "No, come to think of it that wouldn't work out either. The boys would get scared and light out. I might not be able to find them again. And I got enough money for a couple of years yet. We'll wait and see how things turn out."

He was afraid to write to them and warn them. They might go away. They were his old bunch—the wild ones who had ridden with him—and he wanted to be back with them. With Doc and Eddie and Mike and Joe, and even Bart. And there was Kitty. She was there in Yucca City, too.

True, he now had another gang and was its accepted leader. Big Sam, Cardinez the smiling Mexican, Pee-Wee the horse-thief. Prison had brought them together, but Doc and the others were still the old bunch. They were the ones he wanted to see again.

"I'm going to bust out of here," Clay said suddenly.

"All right, boy," Big Sam said. "We been wonderin' how come it took you so long to make up yo' mind. We just been waitin' for you-all to say the word."

"I've said it now. Keep your eyes open while I work out a few more details. I'll let you know when."

He didn't make it that year, nor did any of the others get trusty jobs because Borden, who was the real master of the camp, knew they were his friends. The guard captain was taking no chances. He had come back from his month long "vacation" all smiles.

"Right where you said it would be," he had said with a grin. "Thanks, Burch. Sorry I can't give you a trusty job, but I can't risk it. You go back on the teams with the others. We'll see."

The spider was sucking the blood out of the fly. And time rolled by. Until Clay received a letter from Bill Clark; the only one other than those from his mother. Clark wrote with third grade spelling:

Dear Clay:—i shoulda writ you sooner but didnt. i kept waiting for a letter from you but you never writ me. i wrote the govenor last year and this year too to try and get a parole for you but he wouldnt do it. im down sick and about done in i guess. Sonny is sheriff now and he is a good one. i had to send up Boyd Arnst for stealing groceries out of Marcos store in Cedar City but wonder if you seen him there. he is no good. Clay you ask me how I knowed about you holding up that Cedar City bank of Colters. i never told you because i was a lawman. i will tell you now because i figger you are doing time for all them. But i ain't saying anything to anybody. Clay, it was Bart. he was a bonty hunter i hired to get next to your gang. While you was on trial i sent him the $3000 reward for you that the State of Texas paid. he writ me that he was going to turn them in and collect the rest of the bontys, but got to figgering they was turned honest and maybe he would hold off for a while. now he is running for sheriff this year. maybe he is going to wait till he gets to be sheriff before he collects the rest of the bonty on your gang, ha, ha. Clay, I hope you are doing all right and i will write the Govenor again soon.

your friend, WM. CLARK, former sheriff."

Clay Burch closed the letter, crushing the paper into a ball in his calloused hand. *Bart!* So that was it? Bart had joined the gang as a bounty hunter and was, even now, playing his game carefully. He had collected the three thousand dollars reward for the capture of Clay. And he was down there with Doc and Eddie and Mike and Joe, biding his time. Waiting to be elected so he could capture the whole gang and make a big splash as the new sheriff. Get reelected again.

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"I've got to get out of here," Clay burst out savagely.

PEE-WEE looked at his drawn face. "You look like you had some bad news, boy."

"So it was Bart!" Clay said. "Getting on the good side of Joe because Joe was good-natured and easy going. A bounty hunter who joined the outfit and sent word to the sheriff that sent us into a trap. And now he's biding his time, waiting until the proper moment to collect on the rest of them."

He looked at Big Sam, at Cardinez, at Pee-Wee. Something of the old spark had come back into his eyes again. He was once more Clay Burch, leader of the wild bunch. His old gang was in danger and he had to protect them. He had to break out to protect them.

"I'm crashing out of here to settle a score with a rat," he said to the others. "I'm making invitations. Anybody accepting?"

Pee-Wee scratched at his thick shock of black hair. "I've got a good deal of time in on my five, Clay, but I just naturally crave to feel good hossflesh underneath me again. I just naturally got a weakness for good hossflesh—even if they do belong to some other man. Tally me as an ace in the hole."

"Sam?" Clay asked the Negro stonily.

Big Sam leaned back in his bunk and put his head beneath the pillow. There was a long rubber tube there. It connected with a bottle hidden beneath his bunk; a bottle smuggled in by the trusties. A present from his wife.

"I'd just naturally like to see that little gal once more," he said.

He didn't say whether the woman in question was his wife or the girl over whom he'd killed another man.

He was in.

"Cardinez?" Clay asked.

"Can I keel the Senor Borden before I go?" Cardinez said.

He was in.

"No," Clay said. "We'll use him as hostage, because we're not going to be dumb and try for a break from the road gang. We're going to do it from right here."

"I wanta go back to my contree an' see the bool fights," Cardinez said with a smile.

They fell asleep that night while Clay's mind buzzed with a thousand details of his plans. They went out on the road gangs each day, but Borden was watching Clay like a hawk. The four never discussed their plans in the bunkhouse. Clay was afraid. They talked only when on the job and when alone while eating or resting the teams. They watched and waited but the hoped for chance didn't come that winter. Borden came to Clay the following summer.

"I'm taking my little trip this year again, Burch," he announced that Sunday afternoon in the office. "You'd better draw me a map for another ten thousand. You've got it, I know. I'm leaving next Saturday."

"Yes, I've got it," Clay said. He long since had ceased to say "Captain, sir."

He took pencil and paper and wrote in the name of Llanos Oros and marked out their old campsite in the gully a few miles away. He put down the location of three mesquite trees and one lone cedar on the bank of the gully.

It was the last ten thousand he had.

"Fine, Burch, fine," Borden grinned, taking the paper. "In another three or four years perhaps—when I get ready to retire—we can arrange an escape for you."

"Yea," Clay thought to himself. "And get a bullet in the back of my head while you head for Arizona to pick up some bounty money, you rat."

Next day on the job Clay told his men.

"This is what we've been waiting for. Borden is leaving Saturday to pick up the last ten thousand I've got. That's break number one. Break number two is that we have our first baseball game Sunday. So we make the break Sunday just as the baseball game ends and the men are milling back to the bunkhouses. The warden was here every Sunday while Borden was gone. He'll be here."

He looked at them; at Big Sam, Cardinez, and Pee-Wee.

"Pee-Wee, you and Cardinez never liked Sam. So you're going to tangle with him right in front of the warden's office, but make sure the warden is inside or standing near his office. Cardinez, I want that knife you've had hidden away for two years. Slip it to me Sunday just before the ball game."

A guard rode up and looked down. "Get 'em movin'," he ordered.

Clay picked up the lines and Big Sam grasped the plow handles. They went back to work.

Borden rode by on Saturday morning while Clay was examining the hoof of

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one of the mules. There was a rock lodged in it and Clay tried to work it out with a stick.

"I'm all packed and ready to leave," the head guard said. "You sure that map is right, Burch."

"The map is right," Clay Burch said.

"It better be," Borden said.

They attended church the next morning, the half-drunk warden singing with the prison choir while a convict pumped the bellows of a small organ and another played. The preaching was done by an ex-thief who had turned religious. They all filed out of the bunk building where the services had been held and went to dinner. Right afterward the ball game started. Clay hoped the men would play a double header until almost sundown. That was the way it had been when he had ridden with Doc and the others of the old bunch: the later you worked the less time until darkness which would help to throw off pursuit.

BUT the main game broke up in the middle of the afternoon and men in little groups began strolling back. A hundred others lounged about the compound, while the guards on their platforms took it easy beneath canvas stretched for protection from the sun.

The fight started right in front of the warden's office as he started to enter. Convicts began whooping excitedly at something to break the monotony, and there was nothing like a good fight. They formed a ring around three men who were having it out on the ground. Cardinez was snarling Spanish oaths as he fought with Big Sam. Big Sam had the Mexican down on his back and was straddle him. Pee-Wee leaped in and was flung ten feet by a massive black arm. The giant Negro locked his two great hands around Cardinez' throat.

"Boy, I'm just naturally goin' to kill you," he panted.

The convicts were dancing around and yelling to the battlers. They had heard for the past week that there was trouble brewing among the three. They had quarreled openly. Now it had come to a head and furnished them with a bit of diversion.

Pee-Wee leaped astride Sam's back and was trying to choke him. Two compound guards came running with clubs and the warden bellowed as he made his way through the ring of men to split the battlers.

"Get up," he shouted. "Get up!"

The rest of it was choked off as an arm caught him from behind and a needle pointed, razor sharp knife was pushed against his back. Clay dragged the helpless warden four feet and snarled at the crowd to let him through.

The fight had stopped in a hurry. The blow of the swung club bounced harmlessly off Big Sam's forearm and he swung a giant fist. The ring of convicts had kept the platform guards from shooting. Sam picked up his man as Cardinez snapped cat-like off the ground and with Pee-Wee locked the other guard's hands behind his back. Cardinez had a second knife and his eyes were glittering as he jabbed the point against the man's spine.

"Beeg fool," he said grinning.

Then the door of the warden's office slammed shut before the astonished convicts hardly knew what was happening, and Clay had his three prisoners.

"Get over to that window and tell them guards to come down without those guns," Clay ordered. "Tell 'em we've got the keys to the gun room here in the office and are opening it to get Winchesters. Get 'em down here quick or they're dead men."

"You can't get away with it, Burch," gasped out the white-faced camp warden. "You'd better give up."

"Tell 'em!" snarled Big Sam savagely, "or I'll fasten these big han's right around yo' th'oat an' twist off yo' head like a chicken's."

"Get over there," Clay snapped. "It's your lives against ours. Three dead men in here and some more out there if Sam had to break into the gun room." A crash told Clay that Sam's giant foot had just caved in part of the door. "You got your job through politics. You let Kearney starve us while you ate white man's food and pocketed part of Kearney's profits. You let Borden beat us and give us the water treatment—and then you stood up in church this morning and sang a praise to God for us!"

He hurled the frightened man toward the window as Big Sam came out of the gun room with three rifles in his hands.

"We kin pick 'em off just like shootin' ducks," he said, showing his teeth.

The frightened warden was shouting an order to the guards. The yard was a bedlam of excitement. A break! Clay Burch, the bank robber, was crashing

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out! One guard left his rifle on the platform and jumped down to be made prisoner. The second guard soon followed. They knew the other convicts couldn't get to the guns from inside the enclosure, since the platform steps were from the outside. The wire itself was twelve feet high and a mass of needle pointed barbs that would cut a man to pieces if he tried to climb up.

It took ten minutes of shouting on the part of the warden before the other guards laid down their rifles and jumped from the platforms into the soft dirt of the compound. The convicts were in a frenzy of excitement. The guards were all captives now. It was a mass break! Everybody could go!

Clay and his men went out with Winchesters in their hands, forcing the warden and guards ahead of them. The captives were loaded down with empty rifles. Clay was allowing no mass break to bring terror to the countryside. He knew some of those men too well.

"Clay!" bawled Boyd's eager voice as the gate was unlocked and a mass of men surged forward. They came up sharp and began to curse as four guns menaced them back.

"Clay," Boyd almost shrieked. "You cain't do this to an old friend. We went to school together.

Clay sneered at the man who had shot him in the back and locked the gate again. Boyd had gotten an extra five years put onto his sentence because of the attempted escape.

"Make your own break," he snarled and herded the captives toward the stables amid a barrage of convict oaths from the compound.

They hurried into the stables and quickly saddled horses and rode out. Then Cardinez asked them to wait. He went back inside and his carbine and pistol began to be heard. The stable became a horror of kicking, squealing, threshing horses. Cardinez the Mexican had shot nine mounts to prevent possible pursuit. The guards who had been off duty that Sunday had ridden away on the others.

They hit leather and spurred out, four figures in white stripes, pounding for the protection of the nearest mesquites. The jar of the big sorrel's feet sounded a knell of freedom in Clay's body and the wind of that freedom beat cool in his drawn face.

He was free and they would never take him back. He was getting out of Texas for good and starting life anew with Doc and the other boys. Big Sam and Pee-Wee were hitting for Mexico with Cardinez to begin new down there.

"I've paid my debt," Clay thought, remembering his scarred back, the water treatments, the rotten food—and his gray hair.

His conscience was clear on that point.

"We make heem loose, hey?" Cardinez yelled gleefully. "Beeg stuff!"

XVI

RIDING the horses mercilessly, they went on for nine hours. Clay knew that the camp was fifteen or twenty miles from the nearest ranch and that it would take hours for one of the guards to walk for help, to get horses, and to get word to the nearest telegraph station thirty miles away. Therefore any pursuit couldn't possibly get under way before the following day.

In the darkness that night they came to a ranch by a river with the words M Bar M branded on the gate. Cardinez slipped into the barn and got two lariats and they roped and saddled fresh horses and drove on again. Clay had left a note tied to the mane of his played out prison mount.

This horse belongs to the Texas prison farm, thirty miles east of Bentley. Please see that it and the three others are returned. I'll send you one hundred dollars apiece for the four horses we are taking.—Clay Burch

There had been sixty horses in the pasture and it might be days before they were noticed and the note found. And Clay wasn't stealing horses. He had, insofar as his own conscience was concerned, paid his debt to the people of Texas and elsewhere for his crimes. The book was closed. He was opening up a new account tonight and it was going to have the figures straight. They were going to tally up right for the long years.

He was on his way to join Doc and the old bunch, to start life anew with Kitty.

"I'm hungry," Big Sam said an hour later. "Oh, golly, but I'm hungry."

"So am I," Pee-Wee called back. "But I'm more sore in my muscles than anything else. Guess I kind of got out of practice ridin' while skinnin' a team. I won't be able to walk for a week."

"When we stop?" Cardinez called.

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"We don't," Clay called back. They had the jump on pursuit and Clay intended to keep it.

They knew the general lay of the country and, in particular, that there were no railroads through here. That meant no telegraph communications. Clay made certain of that when they hit the small cowtown some time after midnight. They broke into the Ace Mercantile Company store and gorged themselves on canned sardines and crackers and canned peaches. They fitted themselves out with clothes and boots and filled gunny-sacks with slabs of bacon, canned goods, coffee, dried prunes, flour and sugar; frying pans, a coffee pot, tinplates with knives and forks, guns and ammunition.

Again Clay left a note. He put this one on the counter by the cash till. "We needed some clothes and supplies in exchange for these prison stripes. Three hundred dollars ought to cover it. You'll get your money. Clay Burch."

And once more they drove on, swallowed up in silence. But there was no silence beyond the wastes into which they had disappeared. The telegraph wires had flashed the news all over the United States that Clay Burch, notorious Western bank robber and outlaw, had smashed his way out of a Texas prison work-camp with three other desperate convicts; a big Negro murderer, a Mexican killer, and an outlaw horse-thief. All banks were warned to look out for a new series of bank raids similar to the terror of years before. Burch was expected to hunt up his old gang and resume operations from Kansas to Mexico.

Clay knew what the stories would be. He could imagine the headlines in hundreds of Western papers. He knew that Eddie probably was writing them himself down in Yucca City.

Thought of Eddie and the others warmed him and brought a grin to his face. Gosh, but it would be good to get back with them! To play poker with Doc and listen to the others.

Clay drove on, riding as he had ridden in the old days with Doc and the bunch. A three-hundred-mile run. Get away fast and keep on going. That was the formula and it was working again.

They made the Llanos Oros country in a record run and camped in the same hidden gully by the same group of Wild Chinas where Clay and his men had camped the night before the Cedar City fiasco. The job Bart had been in on.

They sat by the fire that night, eating hungrily, so worn out and stiff they walked only with difficulty. Big Sam looked over at their gray-headed leader; at the drawn face and smoky eyes.

"What you thinkin', boy?" he asked.

"We beat him here," Clay said.

"Who?"

"Borden. We beat him here, I'm certain. Only thing I'm afraid of is that he'll see the headlines and not come. But if he rode through on horseback and camped out, the boys are safe?"

"What boys?"

"My old bunch. Only four people besides me know where my boys are now living. Two of them, the sheriff who caught me and his wife, will never tell if they're still alive. Borden is the other one besides you, Pee-Wee."

"And he's been bleedin' you dry all the time, you payin' out money to protect 'em?" Pee-Wee Knight asked.

"That's about the size of it, Pee-Wee. I didn't mind the money, which I hoped to return to some of the banks I held up. But there never was a finer bunch of men than those boys, and they've been going straight for years. I expect some of them probably are married and have kids by now."

"That where you're headin'?" Big Sam asked.

Clay nodded. "It's only forty miles to the Mexican border. So if you boys figure on laying low in Mexico for awhile, you can ride over that far with me. They say there's safety in numbers."

Clay finished with the coffee cup and put the cup on a rock. The same rock where he'd placed another like it one night so many years ago; ages it seemed. He picked up a small shovel he'd taken from a store.

"I'll be back in a little while," he said and was gone in the darkness.

He came back half an hour later carrying the shovel and a wooden box under one arm. He opened the box and drew out a heavy canvas bag. It was dank smelling, and so were the sheaves of gold bank notes he drew forth, along with handfuls of gold coins. Cardinez's eyes glittered at sight of the money. Pee-Wee stirred and cleared his throat. Big Sam's eyes were popping out at sight of more money than he had ever seen in his life.

"My-oh-my-oh-my!" he murmured almost reverently. "Clay, wheah's the

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nearest bank and whut time do it open in the mornin'?" Big Sam laughed.

Clay returned the money to the sack and tied its mouth again and tossed it aside. "We'll stake out the place," he told them. "Starting tonight, no matter how tired we are. But I'm worried, boys. If Borden sees the papers he might telegraph Yucca City authorities to be on the lookout for me and to arrest all my old bunch. Or, greedy as he is, he might catch the first train there to wait for me and claim the rewards for all of us. On the other hand, he can stop off here and pick up this ten thousand, hoping he can beat me to it. So we'll rest up ourselves and the horses for three days. If he doesn't show, we'll hit for Arizona."

"Supposin' he do show?" asked Big Sam.

"I've got to protect Doc and Eddie and the other boys of my old bunch," Clay said harshly. "Cardinez, you take the first two hours. Pee-Wee, you take the second. Then Sam and then me. We'll rotate right through. Tomorrow, after we're more rested, we can take four-hour turns. Come along, boys, and I'll show you the place."

THEY staked out the place for three days and nights, keeping their horses hidden. Clay wrote numerous letters in which money was enclosed and slipped into town the second night to mail them. Their horses and supplies were going to be paid for. And the most astonished man in the state of Texas the next morning was Lon Burton the banker when old ex-sheriff Bill Clark ambled in puffing his corncob pipe and carrying a gunnysack.

"Mornin', Lon," he said and put it on Burton's desk. "It's fer you. Found it on my front porch this mornin'."

"What is it?"

"Why don't you open yore Xmas stockin' and find out what Santa Claus brought in the middle of the summer? It's an early Xmas for you, looks like."

Burton dumped the stream of gold coins on his desk and picked up the note. It read:

Burton—I still hold you responsible for the death of my father, the breaking up of my family, and the years I spent in prison. You and John Colter are the cause of it all. But as of this date I'll hold no more bitterness toward you. What's done is done. I'm trying to square up as much as possible with some of the banks I held up. Here is the thirty-two hundred dollars Eddie and I took that afternoon—CLAY BURCH.

The banker leaned back in his chair and stared at the money and at the paper again. A queer look had come into his face.

"Well, I'll be stumped," he said softly. "He's squaring up after all we've been reading about him since he crashed out of the penitentiary. Well, I'll do my share, Bill. Maybe I've learned a few things too. I'm going to spread the news to every paper in the state of Texas that Clay Burch has made good on the first bank he ever robbed and will try to make good on the others."

"I was sort of thinkin' I might wire the Governor and ask for clemency for Clay if he'll come in and give himself up."

"I doubt if he'd do it, Bill. They tell me those prison work farms are pretty rough places. What I'm wondering is what Clay Burch'll say when he gets to Yucca City and finds that Colter followed Kitty there after he absconded, ran smack into Burch's outlaw gang who held him up in Cedar City, and in view of the fact that John himself was a fugitive, they all shook hands and are now good friends."

"He'll do just what he's done with you," Bill Clark said. "Try to square up because Clay's as white and as square a man that ever lived, in spite of his name as an outlaw. The only thing that bothers my conscience, after twenty-five-years of packing a badge pinned to my shirt, is that when Kitty wrote me Colter was there, I had to keep quiet on account of my word to Clay. I told him his men were in the clear as far as I was concerned, because I figgered he was paying for 'em all. The only way I could keep my word to Clay was keep my mouth shut about Colter. Anyhow, what's done is done. We all make mistakes. It's best just to let things lay as they are."

"You're right!" The banker nodded. "Let's you and me take a walk over to the newspaper office, Bill. What say?"

* * * * *

Clay was sound asleep, that third night, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He woke with a jerk but saw that it was the Mexican. Cardinez jerked his head.

"He come, I theenk," he said.

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"Wake up the other boys," Clay ordered and slipped on his boots.

He strapped on his gunbelt and took his rifle. The four of them faded into the night.

It was Borden, all right. He hadn't read about the escape because he had ridden leisurely to a small town where he owned a house and got the money Clay had paid him the year before. From there he headed for the Llanos Oros country and had just made it, stopping several times in gullies to check the map Clay had drawn. He was grinning to himself as he approached. He'd get that other ten thousand and then take the stage out the next morning for—Yucca City, Arizona.

He not only would pick up the one thousand dollars reward out for them, but if Clay had money buried out like this, there was no reason why the others of his outlaw gang shouldn't have too. Once they were brought back to Texas in irons and brought to prison Borden would find some way of squeezing them dry just as he was squeezing Clay. He'd put his money in the bank down there and return some day.

The guard captain saw the three mesquites outlined above the gully bank. He saw the lone cedar. He took out a match and looked at the map again. "Yep, there it is," he muttered. "The three mesquites and the cedar. 'Dig four feet due south of the cedar and to a depth of four feet until you strike the top of a wooden box containing a waterproof canvas sack,'" he read and put the paper back into his pocket.

He rode up and tied his horse to one of the mesquites some distance away and took a light spade from his saddle. He waddled over in the darkness—and then he stopped and stared. A curse from him broke the night silence as he stared down at the fresh hole. He dropped to his knees and felt of the dirt to make certain, snarling his rage and frustration. Burch had outwitted him. He'd somehow got word to that sheriff Bill Clark or somebody else. Borden gritted his teeth. Just wait until he got back to the prison camp! *Just wait!* Before he was through with that double-crossing bank robber, Burch would be down on his knees begging and whining for mercy.

"It's not there, Borden," Clay's familiar voice said from four feet behind him.

Borden spun, his face white in the darkness. He saw four leveled rifles peeping up over the lip of the gully four feet away, and his hand slowly dropped away from his pistol.

"Burch," he husked, "you're *out!* How—uh—where—did you come from?"

They were coming up to surround him and Cardinez stepped in from behind and took his gun from the sheath and tossed it to the ground. A tremor had gone through Borden's massive frame.

"You must have been away from towns where they have telegraph stations," Clay said. "Or would you like for me to call you, 'Captain, sir'? We broke out on Sunday, the day after you left and then rode a string of played-out horses to beat you here. We've been waiting three days and nights."

"Burch," gasped out the guard captain, "I—I've got plenty of influence with Kearney the contractor, who's making the Governor rich on those road contracts by splitting the profits from convict labor with him. Kearney can do anything with the Governor. If you'll let me go or even come back with me, I swear I'll try to make up—"

He never finished it. It was doubtful if he knew what hit him. For the slash of the razor-sharp knife in Cardinez's hand sliced through the back of Borden's big neck and severed the spinal cord. Borden's great head toppled forward on his chest as he fell. The massive paws that had used so many blacksnakes and shoved so many heads into rain barrels twitched once and no more. Cardinez bent and wiped his knife blade on Borden's shirt and straightened.

"Beeg bully!" he snarled. "Now we dig a beeger 'ole an' bury him in it, no?"

"Yes," Clay Burch said.

XVII

DURING the time the others were digging, Clay unsaddled the dead man's horse and turned it loose. He carried Borden's riding gear over and went through the pack to destroy anything that would identify the man were his grave ever discovered. A sharp exclamation came from him and caused the others to look up.

"What is it, boy?" Pee-Wee wanted to know.

"What is it?" Clay almost yelled in glee. "Here's the ten thousand I paid him last year! Ha, ha, ha!" and he rolled

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over on the ground and had the first gleeful laugh he'd had in years. He felt wonderful now.

He could now pay back some more money to every bank he had robbed, dividing it up according to how much they had taken.

When he got up from the ground, some of the prison years had left his shoulders. He felt young and strong again.

"I'm just guessing, boys," he said. "But Borden once mentioned to me he wanted to go to Arizona. There's an even chance he was heading for there now to look over the boys and maybe put this money into the bank."

Big Sam snickered. "All he done got is one of dem deposit-box dinguses. We is depositin' him in it now."

They rode out before daybreak the next morning, leaving brush over the grave, which might not be discovered for years. Borden would not be back to the camp. He would be another of the men who year in and year out died by violence and were put away, never to be heard from again.

They worked westward for days, and the telegraph wires were flashing new stories. Bank robber Clay Burch not only hadn't been recaptured, but banks all over the country were receiving packages of money in both gold coin and paper with a note from the famous robber outlaw that he was returning as much of his share of the robberies as he could, dividing it among them all.

Clay slipped in at night and left the packages in the post offices. He had no way of getting hold of a paper and was unaware of the sensation his actions had caused. It was a thing unheard of. A man crashing out of prison to return stolen money to banks he had robbed! It was incredible! A man who stole horses to get away and then paid for them by mail. A man who broke into stores to get supplies and left the money with a note of apology for burglary!

It took Clay seven weeks to make Yucca City. He dropped out of the desert one evening just at dusk and saw again down along the creek the familiar adobe houses of the Mexicans under the cool cottonwoods near the river. It was all there. The bank they hadn't robbed, the stores along the main street, and the big red livery where they had once bought fresh horses. It was peaceful down there; the kind of peace Clay Burch wanted. And Kitty was there, too, Borden had said. Borden who wouldn't whip and torture any more men. His cruel brain was rotting in the grave hundreds and hundreds of miles away.

Well, Doc and the others were secure now! Clay had wiped out the last danger to them with the death of the guard captain. He and his "bunch" could rest secure now. For Bart hadn't struck yet. Clay knew he hadn't because Doc and the others would be in prison and the prison grapevine would have soon flashed the news to Clay.

JUST one more obstacle left. He was going to kill Bart and they'd all be safe and secure.

He jogged into town by the back way and rode up to the rear of the big red livery. He swung down and led his horse through the gate, closed it, then walked over to the water trough. He left it to drink as a man came out. They both stared at each other.

"Hello, Joe," Clay said with a smile. He walked over to stick out a hand. "Joe, you old son of a gun, you're getting fat. And bald!"

"Clay!" Joe breathed out, his handclasp strong. "Clay, you made it. Boy, we've sure been readin' things about you in the papers. That's about all the news there is these days. You sure created a sensation when you busted out, but when all them banks began to get their *money back* the papers went wild. You're a sort of Robin Hood outlaw—with a five-thousand-dollar-reward for your scalp. I'm sure glad you didn't kill anybody in thet bust out. Same old Clay, eh? Boy, I'm glad to see you!"

"I'm glad to get here, Joe. But I've got to tell you that I'm flat broke. I've got just eight dollars to start all over again with. How are the boys?"

"Same old bunch. Doc has the biggest practice in town, only he's Pete or Doc Tweed now. He's just delivered himself a new girl last week. Eddie owns the paper here—and he's sure been writin' up a lot of good stuff about you."

"Good old Eddie. Is he married?"

"He's Spec Boggs now. Yep, he's married, too."

"Who did he marry?" Clay asked a little too quickly and with a queer feeling in his stomach.

"Oh, a girl here in town."

"How's Kitty?" again with that funny feeling in his midriff.

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JOE'S face turned red. He looked embarrassed and uncomfortable. "Kitty? Oh—uh—she's all right. Same Kitty. Mike ain't married yet. He's too busy workin' in the bank with Colter. Yep, Clay, hanged if Colter didn't steal all his bank's money after Clark cracked down on him and lit a shuck down here a month after Kitty arrived. Funniest thing you ever saw—me an' Doc running smack dab face to face with him on the street. Two of the very gents who tried to stick up his bank!" Joe laughed. "But seein' as how *he* was on the dodge himself, we all busted out laughin' an' shook hands. He's under another name too."

"What about Bart?" Clay asked sharply.

"Bart's the brand new sheriff down here. Just got elected a month ago. He's makin' a good one too."

"I see," Clay Burch answered thoughtfully. He was in time. He was already pondering the problem of how to kill Bart and still keep his identity. The best bet would be to warn the others and see what could be done.

"Where you stayin'?" Joe inquired as Clay unsaddled.

"I haven't got a place," Clay replied, the hint plain in his voice. He took it for granted that Joe would invite him home.

But Joe scratched his head and his now bulging paunch. "Dang it, Clay, I wish I could invite you home with me, but we ain't got room. Them two boys of mine take up the whole house an' my Mexican wife raises a rumpus all over the place every time I have any visitors. My, what a temper she's got!"

"It's all right, Joe. I'll make out. I'd like to see the other boys tonight."

"I'll get word to 'em. Eddie's newspaper office would be the best place. He's got a big room upstairs where we all git together once a week an' play poker. Meet us there at eight. You'll find it two streets down, over there on that corner. Go around and come up the stairs by the side door."

"All right."

"Well, I got to be gettin' home for supper. If I'm five minutes late my old lady climbs my frame. This married life ain't what it's cracked up to be. I'll see you afterwhile."

Clay went to a restaurant and boldly got supper. He cleaned up in a hotel room, shaving and changing clothes. Darkness was putting an end to the long summer day when he made his way along the street and finally came to a two-story building on the corner. Through the windows Clay could see Eddie's paper littered desk and the presses in the back and drawers filled with type. He rounded the corner and came to a doorway. Steps led up and he climbed cautiously. A crack of light showed beneath the door and Clay knocked and a familiar voice said to come in.

He opened the door and went in, and there they were.

The old bunch!

"Howdy, boys," he said, grinning.

It took them five minutes of hand shaking and back slapping with everybody trying to talk at once. Clay was unaware of how he had aged; of his thin, drawn face and slightly stooped shoulders, his gray hair. But he knew they had changed too.

Eddie wore spectacles with much thicker lenses now, the result of late hours in his office downstairs when the paper had to be got out; three times a week, he boasted to Clay. Mike was thinner; sharp and shrewd looking and neatly dressed. Clay didn't know that he had charge of the loan department of the bank and was getting wealthy. His law training had paid off well, and he didn't look like the young swain who once was in trouble with a half dozen different girls. He was all business now.

CLAY froze a little when he shook hands with Bart, who wore a bright pentacle on the front of his dark shirt. Bart sensed it and laughed.

"It's all right, Clay," he laughed. "It's the old bunch meeting again, so don't mind the badge. So they've got five-thousand-dollar reward out for you now, dead or alive, eh?"

"That's what I hear."

They had a good laugh at that one and sat down in comfortable chairs around the "club room" table. Eddie had gone to a cupboard and brought out glasses and a quart bottle of whisky. He poured for them but Clay turned his glass upside down.

"How come, Clay," Doc asked. "I knew you'd sure turned straight by sending money to the fifteen banks we robbed—how come you didn't send some to the five who drove us off?—but I didn't think you'd gone so far you won't even take a drink.

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"No can do, Doc," Clay said. "It's my stomach. All haywire."

"I see. Prison food. But I think I can straighten you out. Just bad food."

"No, it wasn't the food so much, Doc. It's what they call the water treatment. They tie you up by your thumbs and force water down your throat until you begin to strangle. It did something to my insides."

"Good Lord!" Eddie said. "And I thought civilization had come to the West to take the place of the savage."

Clay grinned as he stripped off his shirt and turned, showing his horribly scarred back. "It has," he said. "This is civilization."

He put on his shirt again in silence and sat down.

He said, "It's all right, boys. These scars and my haywire insides don't mean a thing. Just give me a few months and I'll be as good as new. Right now the old bunch are together again. I've got just eight dollars but I can find a job. I can work. Take a look at these hands. Twelve hours a day with a guard standing over you and telling you to keep 'em moving. So don't worry about me. I'll have to hump to catch up with the headstart you fellows got on me. But I'll make it."

He felt warm inside; natural again after the passing of the years. They'd all been through a lot together; and now that it was all over the sacrifice hadn't been too great. Just seeing them here, prosperous and contented, was worth it. He'd do the same thing over again. He'd have given Borden every cent to keep this bunch safe.

"When did you get in?" Doc asked.

"A little before dark," Clay said.

Joe laughed. "You could have knocked me over with a feather when this old son of a gun come into the corral of my livery. Same old Clay except for thet white hair. Boy, they must've treated you rough."

"It was worth it, Joe, to see you boys get away," Clay answered and meant it.

"What do you plan to do?" Mike asked.

"Dye my hair and change my appearance as much as possible and settle down here," Clay said. "I had some other ideas about Bart here when we busted out but I'll talk it over with you boys later."

That one left blank silence in the room, five men looking at him. It was broken by Bart's, "Oh. You mean about me being a bounty hunter?"

Clay looked at the others in astonishment. "You knew? That Bart was working for Bill Clark and collected three thousand off me for that Cedar City job when I got captured?"

XVIII

FOR a minute there was an awkward silence. Finally Doc spoke up. He was toying with a thermometer.

"Bart finally told us, Clay. That he engineered that job on Colter's bank in Cedar City to collect the bounty on us. He did get the three thousand on you."

"I know. Clark thought I'd never escape, so he wrote me the whole story. And while I was getting well in his house after Boyd shot me—by the way, Boyd's in my old camp, Eddie."

"The devil he is!" Joe exclaimed. "What for?"

"Robbing Marcos's store. He got about three years. Then he tried to make a break with a gang one day and we had dead guards and dead cons all over the place. So Boyd got another five tacked on. As I said, while I was getting well in Bill Clark's house Clark told me about Colter hiring Boyd to shoot me so he would have a free hand with Kitty. That was the luckiest break we ever got—Boyd getting drunk and getting buck fever. If it hadn't been, it would have been a wipeout."

"Colter told us all about it. John had a good laugh at how nervous he was waiting for us to show up—and we laughed when we told him how nervous *we* were when we showed up."

"But you do know about Bart?"

"All of it," Mike put in crisply. "Bart came on with us over here, intending to collect the thousand apiece bounty on us. But he saw the possibilities here, changed his mind, and confessed the whole business. We figured that if we held up banks, then he had as much right to be a bounty hunter. We forgot the whole business, bided our time, and helped put him into the sheriff's office."

Eddie had removed his spectacles and was polishing them. Doc was toying absently with the thermometer. Clay smiled suddenly and looked at Bart.

"I came back to kill you, Bart," he said. "But we've all been through a lot. If the rest of the boys want to say it's square, then I'm right with them. It's all forgotten. Your bounty hunting put

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that scarred back on me and this too." He removed a boot, slid down the sock, and exposed the ankle encircled by a white, half calloused ring. "Shackled in bed every night for years. But that and my back and this gray hair are my contributions to the gang. It don't show the water they poured down my throat until my innards were ready to bust open; while I was tied up by my thumbs; or my head held down in a rain barrel until my breath gave out and I began to drown. It's my contribution to the bunch of us. I'll shake with you any time and forget it, Bart."

He pulled up his sock and put on his boot again.

Bart extended his hand. "I'll shake on it, Clay. I feel pretty bad about it now. But it's pretty white of you to call it square after what I caused you to go through—and collected three thousand bounty. By the way, where's this new gang of yours hiding out?"

"There isn't any new gang, Bart. Just the old one. Back together again. I had to have help to smash out and start squaring up the best I could with the banks and then get back here with you boys. If these men wanted to escape, that's their business."

"We've been reading about it," Eddie nodded. "A big black Negro, a Mexican, and a horse-thief named Pee-Wee Knight. He used to be around here."

"He was a nice, friendly little fellow," Doc added. "I fixed up some knife work on him one night. By the way, Clay, I hope *he's* not going to settle here. It would be a dead give-away. He was well known in Yucca City."

Clay shook his head. "He's going on into Old Mexico with the others to lay low in Mexico for awhile. So there isn't any new gang. And now, boys, I need a job. Any suggestions?"

Doc toyed with the glass thing in his hands. Eddie polished his spectacles again. There was an awkward silence. The others acted as though they were waiting for Doc, who had been the *segundo* of the old bunch, to speak. He finally did, looking at Clay.

"Clay, do you think it's safe for you here?" he asked. "There's five thousand reward for you, dead or alive, and some of these banks you paid back might get the idea that you'd come back to your old bunch and that maybe they can collect from the rest of us. I've heard reports there were Pinkerton men on our trails. Might be just rumors. You'd be easy to recognize, Clay."

"Why take a chance, Clay?" Mike asked. "The border is only forty miles away and you could cross over and live easy. We could send you money every month—all you needed to live on over there."

Clay Burch got up slowly, all the warmth gone from his midriff. He saw what was in their uneasy faces. He saw everything.

He wasn't wanted.

"Let's get it straight, boys," he said. "You don't want me here with you in Yucca City, is that it?"

"Aw, Clay, of course we do!" Doc protested. "But, Clay, it's just that one slip up would ruin us all and send us back to Texas for some of those water treatments you went through. It would wreck a lot of homes. I've got a wife and two kids. So has Joe. Eddie has *three* kids. Just one slip up and we'd have our homes wrecked and wind up with the same kind of scars on our backs that you've got. We'd all be back there together on a road gang in striped suits."

CLAY wanted to tell them that they could take their money and pay off as he had. He wanted to tell them that any one of them could have withdrawn from that Cedar City holdup that had turned into a trap. He wanted to tell them of Borden and how the man bled him of his money and would have eventually turned them all in. He didn't say it. Clay Burch wasn't that kind of a man.

"And don't forget that five-thousand-reward on you, Clay," Bart added. "I'm in as deep as you fellows because I helped you stick up one bank. Next month I'm getting married to a gal whose father owns half the cattle in this section of the territory. Just figure out what would happen to her and the wives of Doc and Specs—I mean Eddie—if we got caught. And them Pinkerton men Doc mentioned. The sheriff I beat in the election had an inquiry from them just as I took office. (This was a lie but Clay didn't know it.) I wrote and told them I knew every man in this town since I was a kid and that there were no men living here under assumed names."

"All right, boys," Clay said slowly. "I hadn't figured it from that angle. But I understand." He was already at the door now. "But if I can only see

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Kitty and talk with her. Borden—a man I know—said she was here. Where can I find her? Where can I find her?"

Again that awkward silence. Again Doc speaking, letting him have it cold and blunt. "On the north edge of town in the big white mansion next to mine, Clay. She knew you'd never come back, or if you did, you'd be an outlaw for the rest of your life. So six months after you went to the pen she married John Colter here. She's got a girl two years old and a boy not quite a year. I delivered the both of them."

"I—see. Thanks, Doc. Well, I'll be going. Clay Burch, outlaw and escaped convict, saying good-by. So-long, boys."

He went down the steps and into the coolness of the dark. He didn't stay in his hotel room that night. He want to Joe's livery, saddled his horse, and rode two miles down the river. . . .

Four days passed. Four uneasy days for certain men in Yucca City. On the fourth morning, a Friday, John Colter alias John Bentley got out of his carriage in front of the bank promptly at ten and waved a cigar at the Negro sitting with reins and whip in hand.

"One o'clock, Tom, as usual," he said breezily.

"Yes, suh," Tom answered and touched the brim of the silk hat.

Colter passed into the bank, nodding to depositors and then employees. He gave Mike a good morning. He was a little fat now, graying at the temples, and pleased with the world. A good solid bank, a big home, a lovely wife and two children.

"Anything special this morning, Mike?" he asked.

"Not much," Mike said. "A couple of ranchers to see you, John. Loans, I imagine, though I offered to take care of them. Bart's waiting for you in the office."

"That ratty little bounty hunter," muttered Colter to Mike. "When will these small town politicians learn that money is what counts? He thinks that because of those Cedar City days, he's a big man. Give me another year and I'll make him jump when I pop the whip. What does he want?"

"He didn't say. He's in your office."

"Sneaking bounty hunter!" muttered Colter again and went in. "Hello, Bart," he greeted jovially. "Fine morning, fine morning! What's on your mind?"

"A bank holdup, I think," Bart said.

"Not Burch again?" joked the banker.

"That's just who it is, John," answered the sheriff. "We didn't tell you, not wanting to worry you. But Clay Burch came back."

He told of Clay's visit while the banker sat listening, his face changing color. Bart finished up.

"He didn't say much when we told him of you being here, after running off with your depositors' money in Cedar City to follow Kitty when Clark got hot on your tail with the bank examiners. He just went out, like he was hurt bad deep down inside. I trailed him out of town to where his new gang are camped. A great big Negro, a tough Mexican, and a little cow puncher—the three cons who busted out with him. They were supposed to pull out for the border but they didn't. So I figured today is the day. He always liked Fridays, though sometimes he'd hit on Saturday."

"I see," Colter said slowly, revolving the cigar around in his soft fingers. "I'll leave the matter in your hands."

Bart looked at him levelly. "You just better. I don't want you pulling a stunt like you pulled in Cedar City when we tried to hold you up, though I ought to be grateful for you hiring that town bum to shoot Clay. Doc and the others are alive today on account of it."

"What are your plans?"

"Doc and Joe will be across the street in Joe's livery with Winchesters. Eddie will be over in the square with a shotgun loaded with buckshot. Mike can stay here inside with two six-shooters handy, in case they get inside. I'll be upstairs in the hotel with several deputies. The way I figger it, he'll use that big Negro to take Joe's old place and hold the horses. The Mexican looks like a pretty sharp hombre and will come down the street like Eddie did. This Pee-Wee will lead his horse across the street to the bank like Mike did. Clay will ride in alone like he always did, waiting for signals."

BART rose to his feet and unconsciously polished the badge on his shirt front. "We'll wait until they get on the bank porch and no longer—not escaped convicts. We're going to blast them down. You tell Mike and none of the tellers. They might get nervous."

"I'll tell him," John Colter said.

He went out to tell Mike and the day

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wore on. The street sweltered. Shoppers moved along the boardwalks.

At two forty-five Clay rode into town. He jogged down the main street as of old, and the same old tenseness had come back to his vitals. He saw Big Sam go out from the shade of a store porch and swing up. Cardinez was leading his horse across the street. Pee-Wee had come staggering out of a saloon and got up into leather. Clay didn't see the bespectacled man sitting back of a cottonwood tree in the square, near some gunny sacks spread out on the bench. Covering a shotgun.

His eyes were on a carriage a Negro driver in silk topper had halted in front of a ladies' emporium. Kitty was in the back seat with a two-year-old girl in her arms. Beside her sat a big Negro woman servant with a baby of about nine months old. Kitty's second.

Something choked up inside of Clay Burch. Otherwise he might have seen Eddie. He looked straight ahead as he heard her voice to the Negro driver.

"Wait here, Tom, with the carriage. We'll be right out."

"Yes, ma'am, Miz Bentley," Tom said, and touched his stiff hat brim.

Clay looked around just once more. He was compelled to do so. He wanted one more look at Kitty before he headed south at a run for Mexico. Their eyes met and he saw her face grow white. He rode on and swung down in front of the bank. Big Sam gathered up the reins of the horses. Clay and Cardinez and Pee-Wee started across the bank porch for the front door. They never made it.

Winchester and shotgun fire began to crash down. Something struck Clay a hard blow in the back and knocked him down. He got up and went flat again as the blow hit him a second time. He saw Eddie's bespectacled eyes back of a leveled shotgun and heard its double roar, saw Cardinez knocked flat. Clay got to his feet and reeled off the porch and fell flat on his face in the dirt.

IT WAS over in a matter of seconds. Men and women came running, some of the men with guns. It was over.

Big Sam lay flat on his back in the street, most of the top of his head gone. One of the 45-70 slugs from Joe's old single-shot had caught him just above the right ear and splattered his brains into Clay's saddle. Cardinez was curled up on his side by the open doors of the bank, eighteen small holes from Eddie's shotgun in his bleeding back. He was stone dead. Pee-Wee was sitting on the bank porch with his back against the wall, cursing as he tried to knot a handkerchief around a leg just above the knee. The knee was shattered, the leg dangling. He felt Bart's steel handcuffs go on his wrists.

"Help me up, you ratty bum!" he said to Bart. "Get me to Clay."

He hopped on one leg with armed men on either side of him. A crowd had formed a ring around the gray-haired man who lay on his face. Pee-Wee looked at Eddie, wiping his spectacles; at Doc and Joe pushing through, Doc jacking a shell out of his Winchester; at Mike on the porch with Colter, two guns in his hands.

"That's Clay Burch," Pee-Wee said bitterly through pain clenched lips. "That's the man who went to prison so his old gang could escape. That's the man who paid out his money to a prison guard captain who found out where Burch's old gang lived and was going to turn them in. That's the man who broke out of prison and we killed that guard to protect them; to keep him from collecting a thousand bounty on 'em. That's Clay," Pee-Wee finished. "He was still protecting his men so's they wouldn't have to go to prison and go through what he did."

He looked at Doc and Eddie and Joe and Mike; at their suddenly white and shamed faces. "He wanted them to have happy lives, so I hope they do. Mister," he sneered at Eddie, "yore hands are tremblin'." Then he fainted.

But Clay Burch didn't hear. He didn't see the ring of excited faces around him. He didn't see the looks of shame on the faces of men who had ridden with him and then killed him. He didn't see Kitty's horrified face, the two-year-old in her arms, looking down, or Colter's pleased smile on the bank porch. Nor did he hear Bart's awed voice saying, "We got him! We got Clay Burch! And there's five thousand reward to be split up among the men who did it."

He lay on his face, coughing out the last of his life from a pair of bullet shattered lungs. His fast clouding brain, growing darker and darker every second, told him that the tally of the long years was ended.

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Uncle Jake shows a knot-headed old rancher that nesters can be plumb useful!

Trigger TALK

A 'Jacob Green' Story

by A. LESLIE

HERD 'em out of there, and herd 'em out fast!" roared old Ward Taylor, owner of the T Bar W spread.

When old Ward used that tone of voice, he was beyond argument or reason. But Jess Wilson made a final attempt.

"You don't need that canyon," he said.

Old Ward let out another roar, and glared at his tall young range boss.

"Who in blazes cares anythin' about the blankety-blank canyon?" he bellowed. "It ain't the canyon that counts and you know it! It's that saddle-colored hellion of a nester! Do yuh know what happens when nesters drop a loop on a canyon or gully, or even a swamp? 'Fore yuh know it yuh have a dozen of 'em campin' in your ranchhouse yard. A year or two and the whole section is cluttered up with wire and plowed fields, and where's your cow business? Gone to blazes! That's nesters for yuh! And they ain't goin' to get no start on my range. I say, get 'em out!"

Wilson hesitated, rolled a cigarette, tried one last angle.

"Your lines don't run that far, boss," he said. "That canyon's on open range."

Instantly Wilson realized he had made a mistake. Old Ward got madder than ever.

"Open range!" he bawled. "I've run cows on that section for forty years! That's cow land, always was and always will be. It belongs to the cowmen. We

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got here first, didn't we? You got your powders! Get goin'! Nesters! And a Mexican one at that!"

"Nothing wrong with Mexicans," Wilson interpolated. "I've known a lot of good ones."

"I never knowed one what was good for anythin', except to make trouble!"

"That's the trouble with you," said Wilson. "Yuh never really did know one. Yuh won't have nothin' to do with them. Yuh just say they're no good, and let it go at that. Never took the trouble to find out whether they're good or bad."

Ward Taylor, though set in his way and a regular old shorthorn when crossed, was a fair man. Perhaps what his young foreman said made him feel a mite uncomfortable. He grunted, rumbled in his throat and tugged his mustache. Then he abruptly changed the subject.

"That's neither here nor there," he growled. "I won't have nesters on this range. You got your powders, I said. Get goin'!"

Wilson gave up. He'd gotten his orders, all right, and it was up to him to carry them out if he wanted to keep working for Taylor.

"Take Mace and Barnes with yuh," directed Taylor. "The three of yuh ought to be enough to handle the chore. Get goin'!"

YES, Wilson gave up. There was no sense in arguing with Taylor when he got on the prod this way.

The worst of it was, Taylor believed himself right about the business. He believed that cattle lands should be kept unfenced and untouched by the plow. It was the gospel of the open range, firmly subscribed to by the big ranch owners, who were ready to enforce their beliefs at the point of a gun, if necessary. It was first principle of faith in the creed of the oldtimers.

Jess Wilson, younger, less steeped in the traditions of the cow country, felt differently about the matter. He could not help but feel that settlers seeking homes in this vast, thinly populated land had rights also.

"Of course we can't have them cluttering up the whole country," he told Cole Mace as they saddled up. "But I'm darned if I can see what harm there is in letting them have a few canyons and river bottoms to grow wheat and alfalfa on if they're a mind to. Who but a nester would want Tumbled Rocks Canyon, anyhow! No, I don't like this chore."

"I don't, either," agreed Mace, gloomily. "But we got to take it on, that is if we want to keep ridin' for the T Bar W. And after ten years I got sort of used to the spread."

Barnes, a taciturn individual, grunted pessimistic acceptance of the situation, and tightened his cinches. The three punchers rode away from the ranchhouse, morosely silent. They were well out of sight of the big white casa when Wilson abruptly pulled up.

"Listen," he said, "it's plumb early and we got plenty of time. Suppose we circle around to town first and have a talk with Uncle Jake. Mebbe he can lend a hand."

"Feller, yuh got a notion there," said Mace. "Uncle Jake's got plenty of wrinkles on his horns, and even the Old Man listens to him when he talks serious. If Uncle Jake can't figure a way out, there ain't no way out. There ain't a fairer minded jigger in all Texas than Uncle Jake, or one with more savvy. Let's do that."

They turned south at the forks and headed for Maley, the cow and mining town that was the focus of activity of the section. An hour later they were tying their horses at the hitchrack in front of Uncle Jake's big general store.

Jacob Green (Uncle Jake, as he was known to the section) was a rather small man but amazingly wiry. His lean, spare figure was impervious to fatigue. Indeed, he had often proved that there were few men in Texas capable of more sustained exertions.

The hair sweeping back in a glorious crinkly mane from his big, dome-shaped forehead was white. Nearly white, also, was his short beard. His kindly face was deeply lined with much living and experience, but his twinkling brown eyes were bright, and the spring of his step and the swing of his stride bespoke a youthful vigor at variance with his years.

Jacob Green had seen much of the world over which he had wandered in his youth, seeking that which to his kind is more precious than life itself: freedom of thought, freedom of expression, the right to worship according to the dictates of his own conscience, the privilege of self government. He had been

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soldier, sailor, cowhand, miner and one of the famous Sieber's scouts. Here in this wide land of great distances, rugged beauty and men of action, he had found all he sought. He paid his debt to the land of his adoption with selfless service to his fellowmen.

WITHOUT delay, Jess Wilson outlined his problem to Uncle Jake.

"Now what the blazes am I goin' to do?" he concluded. "I don't want to amble up there to the canyon and hightail that poor Mexican off the land he's been workin' all spring. But I can't buck the Old Man when he gets on the prod this way, and I'm darned if I know how to outsmart him. He figgers he's got first claim to that section and aims to hold onto it."

Jacob Green stroked his beard, chuckled, and replied, "The Founder of your Faith once said, *'Render therefore unto Caesar, the things which be Caesar's . . .'* Now my old *amigo* Ward Taylor, is sort of like Caesar in one way."

"How's that?" asked Wilson.

"Caesar," said Jacob Green, "claimed everything in sight."

"Yuh got somethin' there, Uncle Jake," Wilson declared with conviction. "Wonder if Ward Taylor ever read about that?"

"I expect he has," Jacob Green smiled reply, "but there's something else he ought to read—what the Lord once said to Moses, the great leader and law giver of my people—

" 'One law shall be to him that is homeborn, and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you.' "

Jess Wilson rubbed his chin. "I figger to get it, Uncle Jake," he said. "Every jigger is entitled to a square deal, no matter who he is or where he comes from. Un-huh, that's it, but how we goin' to make Ward Taylor see it?"

"I don't know, right now," Jacob Green admitted frankly, "but mebbe there's a way. Tell you what. I'll ride up to the canyon with you and see the feller squattin' there. Mebbe I can get a talking point to use on Taylor."

Tumbled Rocks Canyon was a box canyon, fairly wide and well brush-grown. A creek, the overflow of a big spring at the head of the gorge, ran down the center of it. The land on either side of the creek was fertile but strewn with rocks, making it difficult to cultivate. However, the richness of the soil promised good crops for a man willing to work hard.

JACOB GREEN

Very few T Bar W cows ever got into Tumbled Rocks Canyon, because of the steep climb over rough ground that was its approach. The critters naturally preferred the valleys and draws to the south, where the gramma-grass was belly deep. But still old Ward Taylor claimed the canyon as part of his range.

"Sure hope that feller in there will turn out reasonable," Wilson remarked to Jacob Green. "Yuh never can tell about nesters. Some of 'em are salty propositions."

"Fair words usually prevail," said Jacob Green.

"Uh-huh, if yuh get a chance to say 'em," put in the pessimistic Barnes. "Sometime yuh don't."

Barnes turned out to be considerable of a prophet in this case.

The four riders slowly picked their way across the broken ground that fronted the canyon. Wilson snorted in disgust as his horse narrowly missed planting a hoof in a crevice between two ledges.

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"A goat would be ashamed to get caught scramblin' this track," he declared. The others nodded agreement.

An eighth of a mile or so inside the canyon the trail climbed a low rise with a bald crest. They reached the crest and loomed hard and clear against the eastern sky.

Cra-a-a-ck!

Wilson ducked as the slug screamed past his face. Barnes swore sulphurously.

"Ride!" shouted Jacob Green. "Get off this hilltop!"

They charged across the crest and down the opposite side of the sag.

Cra-a-ack!

Barnes' horse got that one. It burned a red streak across his rump. He leaped high in the air, came down on a loose stone and went over like a clubbed rabbit. Barnes turned a handspring in the air and landed on his left ear in a bush. Mace's horse fell over Barnes' and Wilson's fell over Mace's. It was a grand and glorious tangle of kicking horses, flying leather and swearing punchers.

JACOB GREEN managed to swerve his cayuse around the tangle. He left the saddle in a streaking dive as high-power rifle bullets continued to yell past.

"Into the brush!" howled Wilson, taking a header over the lip of the trail. The others followed him without hesitation, all except Barnes, who paused to shake his fist and yell curses at the hidden drygulcher. A screeching slug ripped the heel from his left boot. Barnes joined the others in the brush, without delay. The terrified horses got untangled and went away from there. Jacob Green's mount, hit by the prevailing panic, pounded along in their wake.

"They won't stop this side the ranchhouse, and it's a seven-mile tramp!" wailed Mace.

"And I ain't got but one heel to walk on!" stormed Barnes. "I'm goin' to waltz over to that ridge and blow the seat of that jigger's pants around till he can wear 'em for a shirt front. I'm goin' to—"

"Go ahead! Go ahead!" snorted Mace. "Yuh'll look fine dressed in a harp and a nightshirt, with them bowlegs of yours!"

Jacob Green was searching the sloping canyon wall with his keen brown eyes.

"I think I've got him located," he announced. "He's using that new smokeless powder, but as he shifted his gun just now, I caught a glint of sunlight on the barrel. Yes, that's where he is, in the clump of manzanita half way up that little rise."

"Let's get him!" growled Barnes.

Green shook his head decisively. "You fellers aren't woodsmen," he replied. "You'd make a noise, sure, and he'll be all set for us when we showed up. I'll take over this chore. Let me have your gun, Jess. I'm not packing one. Now you fellers just stay here and throw lead in the general direction of that rise. Shoot high, against the canyon wall, so you won't plug me by accident. Make him think we're all holed up here and haven't got his range."

Barnes started to protest, but Wilson shut him up.

"Uncle Jake knows what he's talkin' about," said the range boss, unbuckling his belt and passing it to Jacob Green.

A moment later Jacob Green slid into the brush as silently as a snake stalking a bird.

"It ain't right," protested Barnes, a comparative newcomer to the section. "Uncle Jake ain't as young as he used to be, and he don't even pack a gun."

"No, but it happens he used to be a Sieber scout," replied Wilson. "And I reckon yuh know what that means. He seldom packs a gun unless he figgers to need it, but he sure knows how to use one. Don't go worryin' about Uncle Jake. Worry about the jigger holed up there in the brush. He'll need it."

Jacob Green could hear the intermittent banging of the sixguns as he worked his way through the growth in utter silence, pausing often to peer and listen.

It was quite a distance to the rise, which he had to circle, and it was already late afternoon. Blue shadows were stealing across the canyon floor and sifting into the growth like cobalt dust. They had deepened appreciably by the time he reached the upper edge of the manzanita thicket and paused.

The sharp crack of the drygulcher's rifle had been steadily drawing nearer and now the reports sounded quite close. Green had just about located the spot where the fellow was holed up.

Noiselessly Green slid into the thicket. He was but a shadow amid shadows

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as he glided forward, bending low.

A few more minutes and the rifle reports were directly between him and the spot on the opposite ridge that sheltered the punchers, but very close. The brush grew low and Jacob Green dropped to hands and knees as he wormed his way along.

The rifle let go almost beneath him. An instant later he caught sight of the drygulcher crouched behind a boulder a few feet farther down the slope. He glided forward a pace or two, gauged the distance and tensed for a spring.

WHAT came next was the sort of thing that, on occasions, happens even to a Sieber scout. Green rested his weight on his left hand. The hand in turn rested on a soft carpet of fallen leaves beneath the growth. But beneath the leaves was a tinder-dry stick. Under the pressure of his hand, it broke with a snap like to a gunshot.

The drygulcher leaped to his feet, whirled around. The rifle barrel jutted forward.

Prone on the ground, Jacob Green drew, and shot from the hip. There was a clang of metal striking metal. The rifle spun from the drygulcher's numbed hands and thudded to the ground. Jacob Green bounded erect, the smoking muzzle of his Colt yawning toward the other.

"Elevate!" he barked.

The drygulcher obeyed. There was nothing else for him to do. His still tingling hands were empty and the barrel of the six was lined with his breast.

"All right," said Green, "Now let me have a look at you."

The drygulcher was a slim, dark-faced youth, little more than a boy. He had steady black eyes and lank black hair. He gazed defiantly at his captor.

"Well," said Green, considerable sternness in his voice, "what's the notion of all the lead slinging?"

"I was just defendin' my property," the boy returned sullenly, without a trace of Spanish accent. "I know you hellions were comin' to run me out of the canyon. I don't aim to be run. This is open range, and I know it. I've got just as much right here as the cowmen.

"Why in blazes can't they leave us alone?" he burst out. "They don't even use this canyon. Cows never come into it. Why can't they give folks a chance to earn an honest livin'? That's all I want to do—grow a few crops, and feed and take care of my mother and my little sister. Why can't they give a man a chance?"

Jacob Green looked very thoughtful. "Son, nothing much was ever settled by killings," he said. "If you'd downed one of those cowhands over there, you'd have the whole section after you."

"I didn't shoot to kill," the boy replied. "Yuh think I'd have missed, with yuh stuck up on top that ridge? I could have downed every one of yuh before yuh got in the clear. I just shot to scare."

Jacob Green nodded. "I figured as much," he admitted, "but sometimes a slug goes off trail."

He studied the youth a moment. Abruptly he holstered his gun, gestured to the right.

"There's a couple of comfortable looking rocks over there," he observed. "Suppose you and me sit down and have a talk. Mebbe we can figure something. Oh, don't worry about the shooting. The boys are just peppering the cliff face like I told them to. They'll stop in a minute, when you don't shoot back. Come along."

He turned his back on the boy, walked to the boulder and sat down. The other, after a moment's hesitation, followed. He did not look for his fallen rifle, and his slender brown hands did not even approach the handles of the two guns he wore. He sat down opposite Jacob Green. Uncle Jake regarded him steadily for a moment.

"You look sort of Mexican, but you don't speak like one," he commented.

"I'm not, although I'm of Mexican blood," the boy replied. "I was born in Texas, and so was my father. My grandfather crossed the Rio Grande and settled here, before my father was born."

GREEN nodded. "Your father is dead?"

"That's right," the boy said. "Been dead three years. He was one of Captain Brooks' Rangers. He was killed in the fight between the Rangers and the Rojos stage robbin' bunch."

"I remember that ruckus," Green said. "Three Rangers were downed in it. I knew Captain Brooks well. Come to think of it, old Ward Taylor knew Brooks. I've heard that he and Brooks

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worked together on the same spread, years back. Hmmm! This is beginning to look sort of hopeful. What's your name, son?"

"Manuel Cartinas," the boy answered.

Jacob Green smiled, his eyes suddenly all kindness. "Manuel," he said, "I'm making a little plan, and I've a notion it may work. Now you slide back up the canyon. I'll amble over and haul off the boys. Listen close a minute, and I'll tell you just what to do, after I've softened Ward Taylor up a mite. Uh-huh, I'm plumb sure it will work."

A little later, Manuel Cartinas headed up the canyon, keeping under cover. Jacob Green slid noiselessly into the growth. He was standing beside the startled T Bar W punchers before they realized he was anywhere in the vicinity.

"Where is the hellion?" Wilson demanded. "Did yuh plug him? I thought I heard a sixgun go off up there."

"He's gone back home," Green said smiling. "And that's where be better head for, pronto. We got a long walk ahead of us."

"But ain't we goin' to get that sidewinder?" demanded Barnes. "I want to collect for one boot."

"Ride into the store this week and I'll give you a new pair," Jacob Green chuckled. "You're liable to need a bigger size after amblin' all the way back to the ranchhouse this evening. Come along, I'll tell you what to hand old Ward, Jess. Here's your gun."

When Wilson and Barnes and Mace limped up to the ranchhouse, they found a big, hard-eyed man in dusty range clothes eating supper with Ward Taylor. He was an unsavory looking character, but old Ward made it a point never to refuse anybody a meal or a bed.

Taylor hit the ceiling for fair when Wilson reported the shooting on the ridge crest.

"He was holed up nice," Wilson remarked, "and after we lost our cayuses, me and the boys figured the best thing was to head for home."

"Just wait!" raved Taylor. "We got chores to do tomorrow. I want the boys to take that herd over to the east range. Mace can handle that. Jess, you and me will ride to that blankety-blank canyon tomorrow evenin'. We'll hang around here till late afternoon and slide in there after it's dark. We can get the jump on them danged nesters that way."

Wilson only nodded. The dusty guest's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. He looked even more thoughtful when they repaired to the living room, after they had finished eating. His quick glance roamed about, centered on something for a moment, dropped to the cigarette he was rolling. Soon afterward he took his departure, refusing Taylor's offer of a bed.

"Got to be on my way. Got considerable ridin' ahead of me," he explained.

"Come mornin', the sheriff what's trailin' him will drop in for a cup of coffee, like as not," grunted Taylor. "Well, it ain't none of my business. Now tell me more about that shindig up on the ridge."

Wilson rolled a cigarette before replying.

"Uncle Jake Green rode up there with us," he remarked at length.

"What!" exploded Taylor. "He would! That darn old coot is always hornin' in on somethin', and takin' up for some onery jigger."

"Uh-huh, that's right," agreed Wilson. "Seems to me I rec'lect a time he took up for a jigger—a gent who was playin' cards with a couple of tinhorns and spotted 'em cold-deckin' him, and called 'em. Seems the tinhorns were purty fast, and beat him to the draw. Uncle Jake stepped in front of the gent and shot it out with the tinhorns, downed 'em both. That's how Uncle Jake got that scar on his neck. Them tinhorns shot mighty straight."

OLD Ward Taylor snorted, growled, tugged his mustache, and changed the subject. For Ward Taylor himself happened to be "the gent" who had the run-in with the tinhorns and had came mighty near cashing in his chips in consequence.

The following morning, Mace and the boys headed east with the herd. Jess Wilson busied himself about the ranchhouse, doing odd chores. After eating, he loafed with old Ward in the living room of the ranchhouse.

It was a big room, comfortably furnished. Set into one wall was a huge iron safe about the size of a prosperous bank vault. It looked opulent and important, and was neither. It was empty, and there was no way to get into it, short of dynamite in large quantities. Taylor had

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inherited it, along with the rest of the furniture, when he bought the ranch-house.

"The tumblers is jammed," the original owner told Taylor. "There ain't nothin' in her and I figger she ain't worth fixin' up. Chuck 'er out in the yard if she's in the way."

Taylor had left it standing, and used it to prop up a big mirror.

When the sun began to slant red rays from the west, Taylor looked at his watch. Jess Wilson, who had been watching the partly open front door for some time, looked worried.

"Another half hour and you and me will head for that canyon," Taylor told Wilson. "We'll—say, what's that racket in the kitchen?"

There was a strangled grunt, a thud. The door leading to the kitchen banged open. Jess Wilson leaped to his feet, and went down as a gun barrel smashed against his head. Taylor surged erect with a wordless roar. But before he could do a thing, big hairy hands gripped his shoulders and crushed him back into his chair.

"Set down!" growled a harsh voice. "We want to talk to yuh. Tie that other jigger up, boys. He's gettin' his senses back."

Glaring up into the face bending over him, Taylor recognized his hard-eyed, dusty guest of the evening before.

"What the blankety-blank?" he sputtered. "What's the meanin' of this?"

The big man ignored him for the moment. "Got that cook tied up?" he called to the kitchen.

"Right!" a voice called back.

Two more hard-faced men joined the pair already in the living room. The big man, evidently the leader, turned his attention to Taylor.

"What's the meanin' of this?" he mimicked. "The meanin' is that we want yuh to open that strongbox over by the wall. Reckon there's plenty of dinero in there, or yuh wouldn't be keepin' it here and locked."

Ward Taylor gave a disgusted and scornful laugh. "Yuh locoed sidewinder!" he stormed. "That blamed thing's as empty as your head! And there can't nobody open it."

The big owlhoot glared at him. "Yuh won't open it, eh?" he growled. "We'll see about that. There's ways to make yuh do it, and we ain't finicky. I reckon yuh'll open it, all right."

Ward Taylor suddenly grew apprehensive. His captors were hard characters, the lowest type of border scum, who would stop at nothing.

"I tell yuh I can't open it," he declared. "The darn thing's busted. Look for yourself."

"Keep him covered," the big leader directed one of his men. He strode to the safe and seized the combination knob. It twirled easily. Face grim, he strode back and slapped Taylor across the mouth, hard.

"Yuh figger I'm plumb igerent?" he snarled. "I know how them things work. All yuh need to know is the combination. Now get busy and open it up. Yuh know the combination, all right. Open up!" A murderous glance emphasized the command.

SWEAT broke out on Taylor's face. He licked the salty blood on his cut lips with a nervous tongue.

"I tell yuh—" he began thickly.

"All right," the owlhoot interrupted. "Goin' to be a plumb stubborn, eh? Clem, mosey out in the kitchen and heat a iron poker. Heat 'er red hot, and bring 'er in here. We'll see how much this gent can take."

"If yuh do, I'll hunt yuh down and gut shoot yuh if it takes me the rest of my

Featured Next Issue

THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON

A Novel of Lightning Guns by JIM MAYO

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life," promised Jess Wilson, who had recovered consciousness to find himself lying on the floor, securely tied.

The big man laughed jeeringly. "The rest of your life is goin' to be purty short, I reckon," he promised. "Tie this old jigger to the chair, and hustle up with that iron."

The man Clem re-entered the room. He bore a heavy iron poker that glowed almost white-hot. The big leader took it, approached Taylor. He eased the glowing, sputtering iron toward the rancher's face. "I'm goin' to brand yuh good, fust off," he promised. "If that don't work, yuh get it in the eyes. Ready to open that safe?"

"I—I tell yuh—I—can't!" gasped Taylor.

With a curse the owlhoot thrust the iron forward. It was almost against Taylor's crawling flesh.

"*Elevate!*" roared a voice.

The owlhoots whirled at the sound. Jacob Green stood in the doorway. His brown eyes, hard as bits of obsidian, glinted behind the sights of a ten-gauge shotgun. Under the deadly menace of those yawning black muzzles, four pairs of hands shot skyward.

"Turn around—face the wall!" Green ordered. "Move! Taylor, knock the chair over and try and get Jess loose. You can move your hands."

"Can't get knife!" gulped Taylor as he began rocking the chair sideways.

"The hot iron!" shouted Wilson. "It's there on the floor. Get it and burn the rope!"

Taylor rocked the chair harder, straining and swearing.

"Steady," Green warned the raging owlhoots. "This scattergun packs eleven buckshot to the shell. One move and I'll spatter that wall with you till it'll take five coats of paint to cover the spots."

Taylor finally got the chair over, with a crash and a storm of curses. He clawed and wriggled, got his fingers around the handle of the hot poker and began inching and lurching toward Wilson.

Jacob Green stood with the levelled shotgun rock-steady. With infinite slowness, he was edging toward where Wilson lay, the black butt of his Colt protruding from its holster.

Taylor managed to get the hot tip of the poker against the rope that bound Wilson's wrists behind his back. The air was filled with the stench of burned manila, and the odor of scorched flesh. Sweat popped out on Wilson's face, but he set his teeth and grimly endured the torture as the hot iron grazed his flesh.

The face of the owlhoot leader, black with fury, reflected from the mirror over the safe. His eyes glared murder at the image of Jacob Green standing behind him with the shotgun's muzzles trained on his back. He mouthed threats.

Suddenly his eyes widened. He peered, uttered an exultant yelp and whirled to face the shotgun muzzles, hand flashing to his belt.

"Shoot him, Jake!" roared Taylor.

BUT Jacob Green did not shoot. He whirled the shotgun and threw it—threw it as a soldier might hurl a rifle at "butts to the front." The iron-shod stock caught the owlhoot leader squarely between the eyes. He went down like a pole-axed steer.

At the same instant, Jacob Green hurled himself sideways and down, clutching for the gun at Wilson's hip.

The other three owlhoots had whirled from the wall, hands streaking to their belts. The room fairly exploded to a roar of six-shooters.

But the owlhoots were not shooting at Jacob Green. They had other things to think about. Standing in the doorway was a slim, dark young man, a blazing gun in each hand. His hat spun from his head. One sleeve fluttered in bullet ripped ribbons. A red streak leaped across his cheek.

Then he lowered his smoking guns and stared through the fog at the three figures sprawled on the floor beside their unconscious leader.

"Just in time, Manuel!" shouted Green. "Things were gettin' sort of strained!"

With a few slashes of his knife, Green freed Taylor and Wilson, who scrambled to their feet. Wilson examined the owlhoot leader.

"He'll stay out quite a while, I figger," was his verdict as he relieved him of his guns. "Got a lump on his head the size of a calf's hoof."

Old Ward Taylor was swearing and rubbing his numbed wrists.

"Jake," he said, "I never was so glad to see anybody in my life as I was you a little while ago. And who is this fine young feller who showed up to finish

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the chore when we needed him most?"

"This," Jacob Green smiled, "is Manuel Cartinas. I told him to show up a little while after I got here. We wanted to have a talk with you. Mighty lucky he wasn't late. Manuel lives over in Tumbling Rocks Canyon. He's growing crops over there."

"What!" roared old Ward. "Growin' crops in Tumblin' Rocks Canyon! Is he plumb loco? Yuh mean he's *tryin'* to grow crops in Tumblin' Rock Canyon. Nobody could grow decent crops on them dad-blamed rocks. Now, listen. Yuh know that south pasture of mine—where the crick runs? That's first-rate bottom land, black and rich. A feller could grow prime crops there without half tryin'. Jess, you and the boys hitch up a couple of wagons tomorrow and hightail up to the canyon and pack Manuel's truck down to that pasture. Build him a cabin down there. Him and his folks can stay here in the house till it's finished."

A thought suddenly struck him. He turned to Jacob Green.

"Jake," he asked, "why didn't yuh blow that hellion loose from his backbone when he turned around, instead of throwin' the gun at him?"

"Well," chuckled Jacob Green, "there were a couple of reasons. That old gun belongs to Manuel. I packed it along when I rode over here from his place. Figured to take it to town with me and do some repair work on it. You see, it isn't loaded."

"What!" gulped Taylor. "Yuh mean to say yuh braced them killers with an empty gun? But how in blazes did the hellion know it was empty? He couldn't see down the barrels."

"No," agreed Jacob Green, "he couldn't see down the barrels. But he was looking straight into that mirror over the safe all the time and had a good view of the gun. He finally spotted what I was scairt he would—that the darn thing didn't have any triggers!"

Utah Gets the Bird

By JOHN BLACK

IF you like ducks—to look at, not to shoot—have a look at Utah's Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge, where the Federal Government is waging another battle in its fight to save game and wildlife.

The Bear River Refuge is a real waterfowl heaven. An estimated 2,000,000 birds hit the 64,000-acre marsh area all at once in the September peak of fall migration. Token bandings have shown that the birds follow one of the great western migratory ways, coming south from Alaska and then fanning out to winter in Mexico, Honduras, or branching west to land in the far South Pacific Islands.

Fourteen miles of road wind through the swamps and about the lakes and marshes of the area so that tourists can get a look at the thousands of different species of birds which sometimes darken the heavens as they did in the old days before the repeating shotgun was invented.

There are seabirds here, way inland, such birds as gulls and terns and pelicans. There are inland water birds like herons, plover, curlews, sandpipers, ibis, grebes and phalaropes. And there are always the ducks, the clowns of the air, in their bright uniforms: mallards, teals, red-heads, pintails, canvasbacks and others. In the spring the Canada goose is there on his way north and in the late fall there are snow geese and the magnificent white swan.

The visitor to the refuge, seeing the richness of life, gets a new slant on his own country, a glimpse of things as they once were and can be again, with a little wise guidance in conservation.

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a novelet by

DWIGHT V. SWAIN

As his fingers wrapped around the gunbutt, Quinn's heart began to pound

Guns at

1

THERE were three of them, silent, nondescript men in shabby clothes, with nothing in common save a certain coldness of eye and the lethal set of the well-worn, tied-down guns that rode low on their hips. By the time the third sat down, Maricopa Quinn knew for sure they had come to kill him. It was too much of a coincidence that three gunslicks should wander into the dining room of Gallows Crossing's lone hotel while he was eating; and when each of the three chose a seat that gave a clear line-of-fire to his own, the whole proposition left the realm of conjecture and entered that of certainty.

Maricopa eyed the trio with a feeling that came close to cold detachment. He thought of the three as parts of a problem rather than as men, and was

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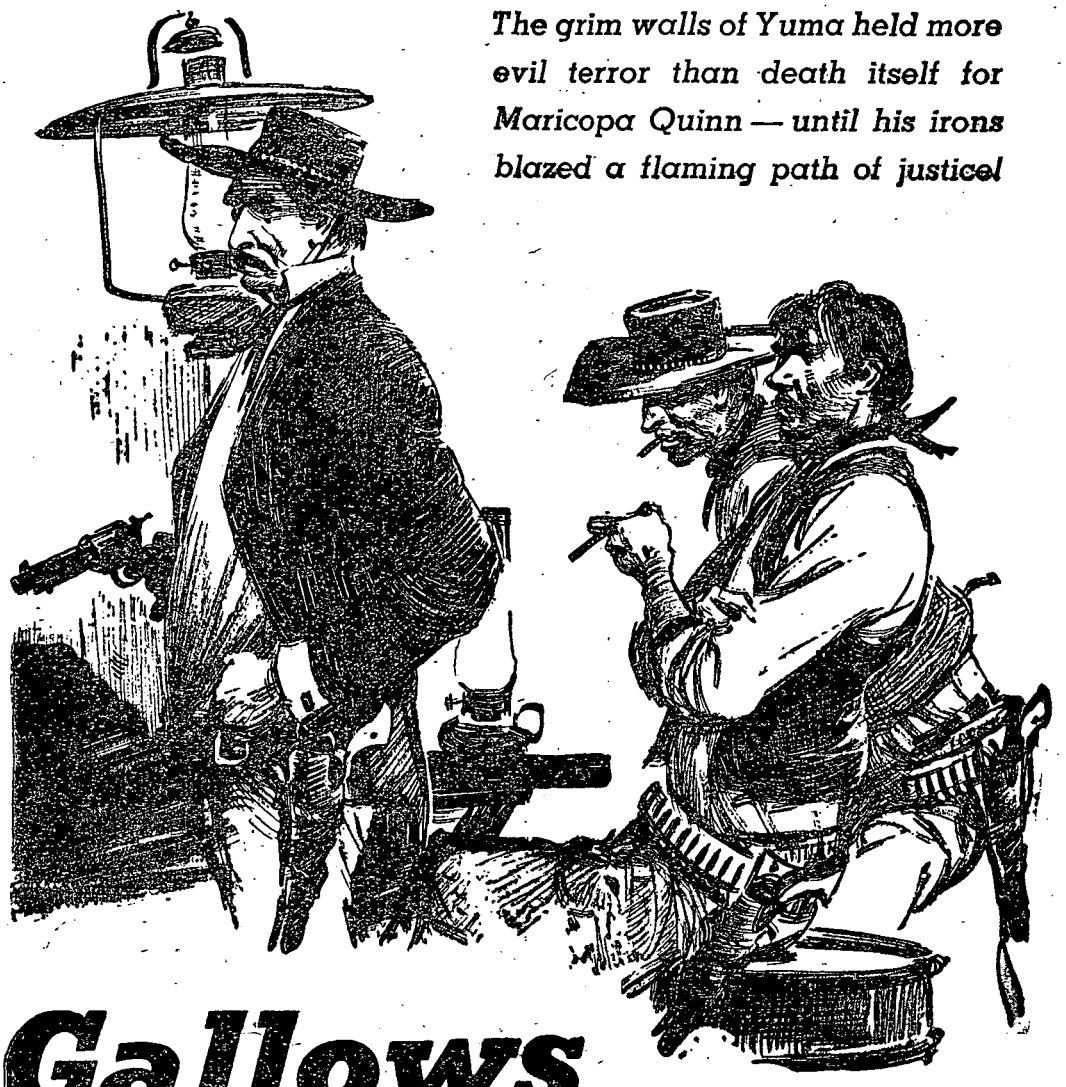
The grim walls of Yuma held more evil terror than death itself for Maricopa Quinn — until his irons blazed a flaming path of justice!



Gallows Crossing

glad he could so think. It was a trick of the trade, a mental quirk that went with successful, professional gun-work. It helped reduce fear from quaking paralysis to just another factor for consideration, like range or windage. Even now, in this crisis, his only real emotion was regret that maybe after all his efforts, everything he had gone through, he still wouldn't live to clear his name of the crimson, bushwhack-murder stain by tracking down Oren Rayburn's killer.

Woodenly, Maricopa stared ahead; it was as close as he dared come to sighing. His chance of catching the unknown murderer had been slim enough from the start, even with the unexpected break old George Webber had given him on the death weapon, the convert-

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ed Navy Colt. Now, with these three wolves taking cards, the odds against him soared to the kind of figures that go with astronomy.

His mind moved on to Jud Hamling. He wondered what had happened to the dapper, smiling speculator. Something drastic, for sure; probably something involving blood and bullets and tied in with the presence of the three gunslicks here in the dining room, for Hamling alive was always a man for the high dollar; he'd never spend time and money breaking a convict out of the fiery hell that was Yuma Prison, then fail to meet that convict at the appointed place to collect.

LONG habit had led Maricopa to sit with his back to the wall, away from other diners and where he could watch the street door. And while such a position had its advantages, it also put him far—too darned far, right at the moment—from the room's exits, one of which gave onto the street, the other to the kitchen. There was a third door, closed, but Maricopa had seen no one pass through it, so it couldn't be counted. It might be locked, or maybe it led to a closet.

He considered shooting out the lights. But unfortunately, they were coal oil lamps, half a dozen of them, attached to a wagon wheel swung close to the high ceiling. The chain by which the wheel was lowered when the lamps needed refilling was hooked to the wall just outside the kitchen door, the whole width of the room away.

That left it straight gunplay, at three-to-one odds.

The kitchen door opened. A waitress hurried in, loaded with steaming, fragrant platters of biscuits and country-fried steak, bowls of gravy and potatoes and black-eyed peas. She was a tall girl, slender, and she moved gracefully in spite of her burden, flashing Maricopa a smile as she passed. Maricopa smiled back, a little wistful. It had been a long time since a girl had smiled at him.

She paused on her return. "Everything all right, stranger?" Her voice was low and pleasant, and it came to Maricopa that the hair he'd first thought brown now rippled coppery in the lamplight. She was pretty, too—almost beautiful; and the realization made his heart drum a beat faster in spite of him. He said, "Everything's just fine, miss," then added regretfully, "though it might be just as well for you to walk wide of me; there may be . . . difficulties."

The girl's eyes widened, and in the semi-gloom Maricopa couldn't be sure whether they were brown or deep blue. A little of the color left her smoth cheeks. She said, "Of—of course," then walked swiftly away.

Maricopa went back to eating, left-handed. The right, he kept near his Colt. He wondered what the three gunmen were waiting for. This was as good a chance as they could ask.

The street door, opening, cut short his thoughts. A man entered, then paused a moment surveying the room. He was built squarely, solidly, with tight lips, a jutting jaw, and an air that spelled lawman even more plainly than the badge he wore.

Abruptly, the man strode forward. His eyes locked with Maricopa's; held them. A queer, taut hush seemed to fall over the big dining room.

The man said, "I'm Tom Reese." He flicked a thumb at his badge. "Marshal."

Maricopa nodded.

"I've been told you're Marion Quinn—Maricopa, they call you. Is that true?"

Again, Maricopa nodded. His mouth was strangely dry.

"The same Maricopa Quinn that ramrodded the Triple Crescent gunhands in the Grizzly Basin war?"

"Yes."

"Then you're under arrest as a fugitive from Yuma. Unbuckle your gun."

Very slowly, Maricopa rose. It was as if all at once he were back in Yuma's fiery hell once more, breathing the prison dust and stench and heat while the sun beat down, a living enemy, and the clang of the cell doors in the solitary block echoed in his ears like the knell of doom. He wondered, almost bewilderedly, why he hadn't at least tried to lie. His palm itched for the butt of his Colt.

"Unbuckle it, Quinn," Reese repeated.

"I can kill you before you clear leather, Marshal," Maricopa said.

"I don't doubt it, Quinn. But you won't." The tight lips twisted. "Your gun's for hire, but you've never

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used it against the law."

"That was before they framed me to Yuma, Marshal."

Sweat came to Reese's face. New lines appeared. But the muscles along his jaw still stood out in stubborn ridges. "Make your play, then!" he snapped. "I'm taking you in!"

THROUGH an eternity that lasted the barest fraction of a second Maricopa stared into the other's eyes. Then, slowly, he fumbled at his belt. He felt a little sick.

A taut glance passed between the three gunmen at the tables. One of them eased out a forty-five.

Maricopa's fingers went wooden. He caught himself wondering, fleetingly, whether Reese was part of this scheme.

In the same instant the kitchen door opened. Maricopa glimpsed the frightened face of the waitress. She reached up and clutched the chain that held the makeshift wagon-wheel chandelier; then gestured, beckoned.

His heart leaped. "You win, Marshal," he said as levelly as he could—and dived headlong across the table at Reese as the lamps crashed down.

The dining room exploded into a black chaos of shouts and shots and breaking glass. Maricopa drove home one jarring left to the marshal's midriff. He could feel Reese lurch back. Then, gun in hand, crouched low, he sprinted for the kitchen.

A hand clutched his arm. A low voice, the girl's, whispered, "This way!" breathlessly. She led him swiftly through the darkness to the dining-room's third door, the one he'd been afraid to chance. Beyond it lay a flight of stairs, then a shadowy passage. The girl pushed open another door, locked it behind them. Pitch blackness closed in, magnifying every tiniest sound of breath or movement.

"You'll be safe here, Mister Quinn," the girl said. Her words, sifting through the murk, sounded strained and overloud. "They'll think you got away. Later, I'll let you out."

Maricopa nodded. "Thanks, Miss—" He let it hang, waiting for her to fill in the name.

She hesitated. "I'm Ann Reese."

"Any relation to the marshal?"

"His half-sister. Not that it matters."

"And I'm Maricopa Quinn, convict fresh escaped from Yuma, as you heard back there in the diningroom before you saved my hide, and my name doesn't matter much, either," Maricopa agreed gravely. "The reason I want yours is because pretty words about gratitude don't count. But sometime, someplace, you may need a gun on your side. If that ever happens, you can count on mine."

"I don't want your gun!" she answered sharply. "Just make me one promise."

"Name it."

"Ride out of this town tonight, and don't come back!"

Maricopa strained his eyes against the darkness. "Can I ask why?"

"Because of your gun. Because you're a—a—"

"Because I'm a killer?"

MARICOPA laughed, and the bitterness rang in it in spite of him. "Go ahead, say it. You'll be right. I've earned my way as a hired gunhand. You can even push it further. You can call me a bushwhacking murderer, a coward that shoots down his man from behind."

"I didn't say that," she whispered.

"But you could. You'd find plenty to back you." Maricopa laughed again. He knew he shouldn't be talking, and yet he kept on. "After the Grizzly Basin war, twelve good men voted at a jury trial that I'd sneaked into an alley in Corinthia so I could shoot a man named Oren Rayburn in the back. I'd never met him, but he had a rep for slapping leather fast and he was on the other side in the war and he'd made his brag. They said I was so scared I dry-gulched him before he could force an open fight. That's how I came to go to Yuma."

"You told Tom you were framed."

"Every man in Yuma says that." Maricopa broke off. "That's past history. What I want to know is why you helped me get away from your own brother, and why you're running me out of town."

Seconds ticked by, so many seconds he almost thought she wasn't going to answer. Then, suddenly, she blurted, "Have—have you ever heard of a man named Jud Hamling here at Gallows Crossing?"

"Yes."

"Those were his men tonight—those

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three at the tables."

Maricopa rocked. With an effort he kept his voice steady. "That still doesn't tell me—"

"Don't you see? Tom Reese is an honest marshal. As long as he's here, Hamling has to stay in line. No one knows why Hamling came here, but whatever the reason is, it's bad, and it's bigger than that little *cantina* he bought. I know. I heard enough in the dining room for that."

"So?"

"Tonight was a trap—a trap for Tom. You were the bait. Those men knew who you were. They told Tom you were in the dining room. They thought you'd kill him."

"And if I didn't, they were primed and ready to take care of the chore themselves." Maricopa spoke very softly, but his grip on the Colt drew so tight his fingers cramped. "Win, lose, or tie, this Reese—your brother—would get it. And because I'm wanted, I'd catch the blame."

"Yes! That's it!" The girl's nails dug into his hand. "Now do you see why I helped you, why I want you to leave? If you stay here—if Tom even hears where you are—he's so stubborn and proud he'll feel he has to come after you. You'll kill him. . . ." She choked.

"I don't see where my leaving will help much," Maricopa said. "I know Jud Hamling. If he's really on your brother's trail, he'll get him." He let a pause echo. "Maybe you could use that gun of mine, after all."

"No!" she whispered. "Oh, no, don't say it. . . ."

Maricopa moved to the door. "It's time I was going. Things should have quieted down outside by now."

The girl didn't answer. He heard her dress rustle in the darkness; then the sound of muffled sobbing.

He made his voice gentle. "For what it's worth, you've got my promise: Tom Reese won't die of my bullets." His lips twisted wryly as he closed the door behind him. "Nor of Jud Hamling's, either, unless I'm mightily mistaken!"

II

HAMLING called his place *Los Tres Hermanos*, The Three Brothers. It was a squat adobe building, huddled in a wild crook of the hills half a mile beyond the town. A black finger of brush curled down to give it a shielded, surreptitious air and the two visible windows were deep-set slots, yellow eyes leering in the night. When the door between them opened, mawlike, the effect was of a spitting, snarling cougar, crouched low and ready to leap.

Maricopa Quinn grinned thinly at his own imagination. Warily, he spurred his horse left, up into the hills till he reached the brushy finger. The peculiar, faintly sickening stink of greasewood drifted to him, and his horse whinnied pained indignation as a mesquite thorn stabbed, but Maricopa pushed on through till they came out the far edge of the thicket. Then, reining right, he rode slowly down toward the rear of the building under cover of the brush.

Three other horses already were standing in the shadows. Maricopa grinned again; apparently he wasn't the only one of Hamling's customers who preferred to arrive unobserved, not to mention keeping ready for a hasty departure. He dismounted and ground-tied his bay far enough away from the others to be safe from discovery, then crept close to the adobe.

There were more windows on this side. Laughter came faintly; voices, and the melancholy twang of a guitar as someone thrummed *El Abandonado*.

Maricopa moved on. He found another window in the end of the building; a door next to it. Here it was quieter, the lights inside not quite so bright. Cautiously, he straightened and peered through the glass.

He found himself looking into a tiny, cramped room which he judged to be Hamling's office. A desk occupied wall space beneath a window diagonally across from the one at which he stood, and beyond it, in the corner, loomed a heavy safe. There was no sign of Hamling himself, but two of the three gunmen from the Gallows Crossing Hotel's diningroom sat hunched over cards and a bottle at a round table in the cubicle's center, between Maricopa and a closed door which apparently led to the other part of the building.

Maricopa went back around to the window above the desk. Craning, he discovered that the room's outside door wasn't barred. He returned to it. The latch lifted silently under his careful fingers. Catfooted, Colt drawn, he

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stepped swiftly inside.

The jaw of the man facing him dropped. The other gun wolf, back toward him, started to spin, clawing leather. Maricopa leaped, and slashed with his six-gun's barrel. It connected with a meaty *thunk*. The leather-slapper sprawled in a motionless heap. Still wordless, Maricopa swung the Colt's muzzle to cover the second gunnie. The man cursed him in a low, furious voice, but made no move to resist disarming.

Maricopa eyed him coldly. "Where's your *companero*, the one that flanked me on the right back at the hotel?"

"Go to blazes!"

"You could do with a little less language," Maricopa advised. He caressed the point of the man's chin not too gently with the front sight of the Colt. "A straight answer might save you knots."

A little flicker of something close akin to fear gleamed in the other's eyes. "He's on guard out front."

"How about Hamling?"

The gunman jerked his head toward the closed door. "In there."

Let's go look." Maricopa prodded his prisoner forward and squinted through the crack between the edge of the rough door and the jamb.

THE room beyond was a saloon of sorts. A sprinkling of hard-looking loungers were grouped along a sagging bar where an over-fat Mexican dispensed drinks, while off to one side a slim, dark youth continued to strum sad tunes on his guitar. But Maricopa had eyes for none of them. His whole attention was focused on Jud Hamling, standing talking to a slab-sided, unshaven stranger.

The years had changed Hamling. His thin face was sharper, shrewder, his jet hair beginning to streak with gray. The sureness Maricopa had once admired now came up as cigar-waving arrogance, and the close-set eyes had taken on a cold killer's sheen that not even the blatantly artificial smile could deny. His body showed tension under the fine tailoring of his black broadcloth suit.

Maricopa nudged his prisoner. "Call him in here."

Sullenly, the man opened the door part way. "Hey, Jud! C'm'ere a minute."

Hamling scowled. "Can't you see I'm busy?" he snapped. But he came nevertheless. His voice grated as he pushed through the doorway. "What's the matter with you, you fool? I told you to keep under cover!"

"He didn't have much choice," said Maricopa, heeling shut the door and ramming home the bolt.

Hamling spun. One hand started to dart under the black broadcloth coat, then stopped short as Maricopa gestured with the Colt.

"Quinn!"

Maricopa nodded coldly. "Right again, Jud. Your old friend Maricopa Quinn, that you went to so much trouble to break out of Yuma."

Hamling's glance flicked to his two gunmen—the one still sprawled prone on the floor, the other shuffling uneasily off to one side—then back to Maricopa. His thin face twisted into a caricature of the old welcome-stranger smile. "Thank gosh, Quinn! I was afraid Reese had gotten you. Someone tipped him off you were coming. I sent my boys to warn you, but they didn't get there in time."

"Didn't they?" Maricopa kept his voice quiet. "I've got a notion they showed up exactly when you wanted them to—right on time to murder me as soon as I'd killed Reese."

"Are you loco, Maricopa?"

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm just getting the wool out of my eyes."

Hamling's face reddened. "May I rot in hades before I ever try to help another friend!" he burst out. "I should have left you in Yuma—forgotten you, like everybody else did. But I remembered the old days, back in Corinthia. I even worked up a deal down Chihuahua way, a job where you'd be safe—" He broke off, glaring. "Why would I want to kill you or that thick-headed marshal, either one?"

"The part about the marshal's easy enough. Your place here is a longrider's paradise—near town but out of the way, with plenty of cover and a straight trail to the high lines. As a hideout, it puts Robbers' Roost and the Hole-in-the-Wall in the shade. You can make a fortune out of it, once you fix the local law. But Reese is tough and honest. You can't operate full scale till he's dead and someone you can handle takes his place as marshal."

"So I spend hundreds of dollars

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crashing you out of Yuma to kill him, when the country is full of curly wolves who'd do the job for a bottle of whisky?" Hamling sneered.

MARICOPA laughed without mirth. "Who you think you're hoo-rawing, Jud? Sure, you could have Reese bushwhacked, but it would raise a stink. You can't afford one. But for him to be killed by an escaped convict resisting arrest—that's different. Folks could swallow that without choking."

Hamling snorted angrily. "You're a fool, Quinn. I wouldn't have to reach clear to Yuma to find a wanted man; nor an escaped convict, either."

"You didn't just want an escaped convict, Jud. You wanted me."

Hamling sucked in air. His face set in solemn lines. "Use your head, man," he protested, "why would I want to hurt you, after all the years we've been friends? Why would I bother? You were locked away in Yuma. If I had anything against you, there'd be more than enough vengeance in just leaving you there."

"I wondered why, too," Maricopa answered. "Finally I figured it out. I was framed for murdering Oren Rayburn. Twice I tried to go over the wall so I could dig up evidence to clear me. It got so I couldn't think about much else."

"So?"

"So you got scared that sooner or later I'd try to escape again, and maybe make it. You didn't dare chance that, because you knew that if I ever got out and found evidence to clear me, it would prove you guilty, too." Maricopa held his Colt very steady. "That's the only way it makes sense, Jud—and that makes sense all the way. You killed Oren Rayburn, and then you sat back and laughed while they sent me up for the job.

"Somewhere—back in Corinthia or Grizzly Basin—there's still evidence to prove that, some witness who'll talk under pressure. You were afraid I'd find that witness, so you decided to kill me first. That's why you broke me out of Yuma. By arranging to meet me at the hotel, then tipping Reese that I'd be there and staking out your own wolves to gun down whichever one of us came through alive, you figured you'd get rid of both of us in a way that wouldn't raise any suspicion."

Hamling laughed, but it had a brassy ring. A little unsteadily, he moved to the center table and sat down. "You're loco, Quinn. You know none of that stuff is true. You can't prove a thing."

It was as if Maricopa hadn't heard him. "You planned it all down to the last detail, Jud, just like you planned the Rayburn kill. You're good at that kind of thing."

Hamling didn't answer. Slowly, Maricopa went on. "Yes, it was you back there at Corinthia, all right. I should have seen it before; it's got all your earmarks. First, you planted a Mexican kid to tell me Rayburn was hiding in that alley, waiting to gun me down when I passed; I don't doubt but Rayburn got the same message about me. When we both showed up, you slipped out the alley door of Sonora Charlie's *pulqueria* long enough to shoot Rayburn in the back.

"I almost queered your game, then, because I didn't run hog-wild and start shooting at flashes; my gun wasn't dirtied. But you'd been smart enough to use the same kind of iron I carried, a .36 Navy Colt converted for metal cartridges. In all the milling around and confusion that went with arresting me, you managed to switch the gun you'd used for mine. Then the doctor dug a .36 slug out of Rayburn. Navy Colts weren't common. That was enough for the jury. They'd have hanged me if I hadn't had the best lawyer in the Territory."

"You're loco, Quinn," Hamling repeated sourly. "That switched pistols story didn't get you anywhere at the trial, and it won't get you anywhere now."

Maricopa shrugged. "Maybe, maybe not. But I've learned some things since I went to Yuma. For one, old George Webber, the gunsmith at Tucson that converted that Navy Colt of mine, kept a record of the serial number in his job book. It proves the gun they put up at the trial wasn't mine."

"Does it? For my money, it just proves that you owned more than one Navy Colt."

"But if I was to find that gun that Webber's records show is mine here, in your place, mightn't it make the governor wonder just a little—enough, maybe, to order me a new trial?"

Hamling's close-set eyes seemed to

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sink deeper into their sockets. "I doubt you're likely to find it, Quinn."

"You should know, Jud. And if that's true, then I guess I'm done for." Maricopa lowered one hip to the desk behind him. He set his lips in a mirthless grin. "It's funny though. All of a sudden I don't give a dang."

Hamling frowned. "What do you mean?"

"How much plainer can I say it?" Maricopa hefted his Colt. "You did a good job, Jud. I'm done for. I was convicted of murder to begin with. Since then, I've tried to break out three times. The law classes me as a bad actor, and they know how to handle that kind at Yuma. So now I'm loose, I'm not going back. I'm hitting the high lines, giving up all the ideas I had about proving I didn't murder Rayburn. But I know you did the job, even if I can't prove it, and I'm blamed if I don't cash in your chips for you before I leave."

THE color drained from Hamlin's gaunt face. His nails rasped the table top. "Listen, Maricopa, you're all wrong," he protested raggedly. "Don't even talk that way. Besides, it won't do you any good to kill me. Maybe we can make a deal."

"The only deal I'll make puts you in Yuma in my place, with a signed confession in writing that you murdered Oren Rayburn, and my old Navy Colt to prove it."

"But I can't—"

"Yes, you can! I know that kind of proof is still around, or you wouldn't have cared whether I broke out of Yuma or not. You've got maybe thirty seconds to decide."

Silence descended on the little room, an uneasy silence interwoven with the guitar and muffled voices from beyond the door, and the heavy, uneven breathing of the man on the floor. Maricopa caught himself wondering what he'd do if Hamling defied him. He'd killed men, more than his share, but those had all been in fair fight. Even the thought of cold-blooded execution, no matter how richly deserved, made him a little sick.

Then, abruptly, the second gunman shuffled his feet and shot a fast glance at Hamling. Hamling's eyes gleamed. His fingers stopped their ceaseless shifting, and his smile came back. A little too loudly, he said, "All right, Quinn. You win. I'll have a chance in Yuma. But you—you'd kill me here."

Maricopa stood very still, nerves suddenly raw and prodding. Somewhere outside, a horse nickered in the night.

There had been three horses up there in the brush, three gunmen in the hotel dining room. One of those gunmen was supposed to be outside on guard now. And this desk stood in front of a window.

Maricopa whirled and dropped, firing. Colt thunder from outside the window mingled with the blast of his own gun. Lead whipped past his face. He glimpsed the third gunman's shocked face. Then one of his slugs smashed into it. The man disappeared.

Pivoting, he fired again, this time at the man who had shuffled his feet. The gunslick dropped before he could raise his forty-five, retrieved from the corner where Maricopa had tossed it. Hamling's hands came up empty. A derringer from his vest pocket thudded on the floor.

A rumble of excitement echoed from the bar. The door burst open, half torn from its hinges.

Maricopa leaped toward Hamling. He hooked an arm around the speculator's neck, jerked him up to form a shield just as the first of the crowd from the other room charged in. He rammed his gun into Hamling's ribs. I'm leaning on the trigger! If I go, he goes, too!"

Hamling's voice came out a raw scream of fear, "Hold it, boys! For gosh sakes—"

Taut, watchful, Maricopa backed to the outside door, dragging Hamling with him. "In case you've got ideas, Jud's riding with me." He jerked open the door, caught one sidewise glimpse of a gun whipping down behind him. Then his head was exploding in a swirling rainbow of pain, and he was falling . . . falling. . . .

Words drifted down to him through the haze, words in a harsh, familiar voice. "Stand back, all of you! This scattergun's loaded with buck, and this man's my prisoner! I'll kill the first one that tries to take him!"

It was Marshal Tom Reese talking.

III

GALLOWS CROSSING jail consisted of three cramped cells crowded into

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the room behind the marshal's office. Bright morning sunshine came through the east windows, tracing sharp shadow-patterns on the dusty floor.

Sober, alone in the cellblock, Maricopa Quinn watched the silhouettes creep toward him. They brought no cheer, for though the sun's warmth was welcome after the chill of an Arizona April mountain night, the shadows were still the shadows of bars. Yuma seemed very near.

Sounds drifted back from the office —grunts and yawns and footsteps; Tom Reese announcing his intentions of going to breakfast to the jailer. A door slammed as he left.

Maricopa rose from the rough wooden rack that served his cell as a cot and stared out across the hills. His head still ached beneath its bandages. For the dozenth time he tested his prison. But it was new and strong. The bars didn't even quiver.

Frustration, futility, rose to gnaw at him. He'd come so close to winning. Yet here he was, back in jail again. Worse, like a fool, he'd shot his wad where Jud Hamling was concerned. He'd told what he thought and why he thought it, showed all his cards. By now the Navy Colt—if not previously disposed of—no doubt was rusting at the flooded bottom of some abandoned mine shaft.

Again the sound of the office door opening and closing reached him. Unconsciously, he strained his ears for some clue as to the visitor. Maybe Yuma wouldn't be his problem, after all. Maybe Jud Hamling would come first.

Then, abruptly, the door between office and cellblock opened. The jailer said, "He's in there, Miss Ann. But make it fast. Tom'd skin me alive if he ever found out I'd let you sneak in to see this varmint."

Maricopa turned as the girl from the hotel dining room slipped in. With a queer stab, he saw that she didn't seem to stand so straight today. Her face looked drawn and tired, and her lips were pale.

"I wasn't expecting company, Miss," he began, then halted and started over. "I'm sorry I wasn't able to keep my promise to get out of Gallows Crossing for good." But the words still seemed meaningless and out of place.

"It doesn't matter. I should never have asked you to leave to begin with." She drew the door closed behind her. "I — had to come."

"Why?"

Her eyes dodged his. "I have a conscience, Mister Quinn."

Maricopa studied her, puzzled. He didn't speak.

"You—you understand, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

THE girl crossed to the east windows, still avoiding his gaze. Her hair was really auburn, he saw now, her eyes deep violet. The light brought out new lines of strength and sorrow; accented her breasts' quick rise and fall and the long, smooth curve of her throat.

Her voice so low he could hardly hear it, she said, "I sent you out to kill a man last night, Mister Quinn."

"You did?"

"Yes, of course I did! You know it! My words said one thing, but the way I said them told you to do the opposite. I pretended I wanted you to ride out of town. Maybe I even believed it, partly. But when you walked away from that room last night I knew you intended to shoot Jud Hamling before you left Gallows Crossing, and I knew it was because of the things I'd said, and underneath everything, in my heart, I was singing for joy in spite of all my tears!"

"Because of Tom Reese?"

"Because of Tom Reese! Because he's an honest marshal, and because he's got a wife and three children depending on him, and because he's my brother and I love him!" For a moment there was defiance in her stance, but then her eyes fell again, suddenly misting. "But you didn't kill him, and now you're here in jail, waiting to be sent back to Yuma. And that's my fault, too."

"If you believe that, your conscience is working overtime, Miss," Maricopa answered gently. "My reasons for going to Jud Hamling's last night were strictly personal, and as for Yuma"—he shrugged—"I guess I'll have to take my chances."

"But you'll never reach Yuma, Mister Quinn," she whispered.

Maricopa managed a thin, wry smile. "You're contradicting yourself. I wish I was as sure of heaven as I am of getting back to that hole."

A tremor rippled through the girl. "You don't understand. You still don't

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see." Her fingers twisted at a handkerchief. "I —I hear things in the dining room, and from the Mexicans in the kitchen. To take you back to Yuma, Tom has to travel north twenty miles to the railroad. The stop's called Burdett. But already people are saying neither you nor Tom will get there alive. There's to be an ambush at Chinquapin Tanks, seven miles out."

Maricopa nodded slowly. "I figured that would be the way. Jud Hamling isn't a good man to cross, unless you do the job up brown and permanent." His lips twisted. "So far, no one's been able to carry it through."

"And you're not afraid?"

"What good would it do to make a fuss about it if I was?" Again Maricopa shrugged. "If this is my time, I'll make my peace as best I can and let it go at that."

"But maybe it isn't."

"My time, you mean?"

She nodded. Her eyes looked deeper, darker; her breath seemed to come a fraction faster.

"I don't want to die if I don't have to, if that's what you're getting at."

"Could you get away without hurting Tom if you had guns?"

He stared at her.

Color came to her cheeks. "Turn around. I'll get them."

MARICOPA started to pivot. But behind him, the office door slammed suddenly back against the wall. He glimpsed Ann's scarlet face above a flurry of lace-edged petticoats as she whipped down her dress; and beyond her, in the doorway, the stocky, belligerent figure of Marshal Tom Reese. A forty-five still spun on the floor between the two. Square face stiff with anger, Reese scooped it up.

"Tom!" the girl choked.

"Stop before you start! I saw you from the Chinaman's when you came in. I've been listening ever since you started talking." The lawman swore under his breath. His fists knotted spasmodically. "What were you thinking of Ann? This man is Maricopa Quinn, a convicted murderer."

The girl's back stiffened. "It's not Mister Quinn I'm thinking of."

"I heard what you told him! You think you're protecting me!" Reese choked on his own fury. "What kind of a marshal do you think I am? You'll have me the laughingstock of the Territory." He broke off. "All right. I've had enough. There's just one sure way to put a stop to this. Sister or not, you'll stay here till I've got Quinn out of town." Catching her by the arm, he dragged her white-faced and struggling to the nearest vacant cell and locked her in. Then, turning, he keyed open Maricopa's cage. "Come on."

Wordless, Maricopa followed. Reese closed the cellblock door behind them. His lips drew to a tight, worried line.

"We're leaving for Yuma, Quinn. Right now. I've got sources of my own, and they bear out what Ann said. Jud Hamling wants you dead bad enough to plan a dry-gulching." He eyed his prisoner curiously. "What's he got against you, Quinn? What's his game?"

Maricopa laughed without mirth. "Just a little matter of murder, marshal, a murder Jud doesn't care to do time for." Briefly, he sketched the picture of that night in the alley at Corinthia, the chain of events leading up to the trial.

When he finished, Reese was frowning. "But why? If he was your friend—"

"Friends come second with Jud Hamling, Marshal. I know now that the high dollar always takes first place where he's concerned. There at Corinthia, he was playing both ends against the middle in the Grizzly Basin war. Then the Triple Crescent brought me in to ramrod their side of the fight, and things started going too much one way for his tastes. My bet is that he saw visions of the war ending before he'd drained away the last nickel, so he decided to kill Rayburn to stir up the fire, and even the odds at the same time by framing me to jail."

Maricopa studied Reese. "Up till last night, Jud didn't know anything about this business of George Webber having a record of the serial number of my old Navy Colt, Marshal, but he still wanted to see me dead or he wouldn't have broken me out of Yuma. That means there must be witnesses at Corinthia he's afraid will talk, now that the war fever's died down. If I could spend a couple of days there, I might pick up some things that would let me out of Yuma all straight and legal."

The lawman shook his head. "Sorry, Quinn. I swore an oath that says I have

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to turn you in. It don't allow for any side trips." He hesitated. "After the way you knocked me over at the hotel, I ought to give Hamling a free hand at you. But you didn't shoot me when it would have been easier for you to handle it that way, so I'm returning the favor. If you'll give me your word not to try to escape till we've checked in at Burdett, I'll leave off the irons."

"You're figuring on trouble?"

"Who knows? But I'll admit I'm worried enough so I'd rather not iron you. I don't like to put any man in a spot where he hasn't a chance if things go wrong."

Maricopa nodded. "Thanks, marshal. You've got my promise. Till Burdett, anyhow."

"Then let's go. We'll use the side door. I had horses brought there so we wouldn't have to show ourselves any more than necessary getting out of town."

TOGETHER, they stepped out into the Arizona morning. The sun was higher now, and hotter, and no breath of breeze stirred to cool them. Mounting, they headed north along a well-defined wagon road. Then, a mile out of town, Reese reined west onto a meandering, barely-visible path that dropped off along the rim of an arroyo to lower ground. "Old Spanish trail. Nobody uses it nowadays, because it misses Burdett by a couple of miles, but we can cut over. It misses Chinquapin Tanks, too, so Jud Hamling is going to be disappointed if he plans to collect your scalp there. Don't know which is going to end up maddest about this business—him, at not getting you, or Ann, over being locked up back there in the jail." Abruptly, the marshal sobered. "I should blister her, sister or not."

Maricopa held his face expressionless. "Don't blame her too much. It was your hide she was trying to save."

Reese's sun-darkened cheeks flamed. "That makes it worse! I ought to throw away the key! It'd be bad enough if she'd lost her head over you, but to make a fool of herself and me, too, just because I raised her after the folks died—"

"You think it's safe, leaving her there?" Maricopa interrupted hastily. There was heat in his own face now, and the very fact that he could feel it pricked strangely at his composure.

"Safe enough," the lawman grunted "Old Ed Jenkins, the jailer, will let her out as soon as we're well gone, or in case of trouble or a fire." Abruptly, he reined up, as if anxious to close the subject, and pointed off towards a towering rock pinnacle rising in the middle of the gorge through which they were riding. "That's Dead Apache Point. Old Hank Shiras killed—"

Somewhere, a rifle cracked. Reese rose in his stirrups, almost on tiptoe, it seemed. Then with a queer, startled look on his square face, he spilled sidewise to the ground.

The rifle spoke again. Maricopa felt a slug tug at his collar as he dived from the saddle. Catching the fallen, still-unconscious marshal under the arms, he dragged him bodily into a shallow draw a couple of yards off the path. He saw that the bullet had struck Reese between the ribs, dangerously close to the lungs.

More slugs slashed at them, spraying gravel in tiny, stinging showers. Lying flat, hugging the ground, Maricopa ripped away the lawman's blood-sodden shirt and closed the wound as best he could with a crude bandage. By the time the job was finished, he also had the sniper placed—close to the base of Dead Apache Point in a spot that gave a clear field of fire for nearly half a mile down the trail. Only the accident of the draw's proximity and a little scrubby brush on the slope prevented the bushwhacker from blasting them to Kingdom Come. As it was, he had them pinned down murderously close, yet was beyond pistol range. It would take a minor miracle for them to get out from under.

Reese opened his eyes. He spoke through clenched teeth. "Did he get you, too, Quinn?"

"Not yet. But he sure rates a gold star for trying." Maricopa shoved his wadded coat beneath the lawman's head. "Don't talk any more now. Save your strength till I can figure some way to get us out of this."

The marshal's eyes closed for a moment, then opened again.

"Quinn."

"Easy, Reese."

"I'm turning you loose from your promise. Times like this, it's every man for himself. Get moving!"

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MARICOPA looked off down the draw. By following it and moving fast and taking advantage of the brush, he might be able to break clear. But that would mean leaving Reese. Regretfully, he said, "Relax, Marshal. I wouldn't have a chance, with that hombre up by the Point drawing bull's-eyes on my back with a Winchester."

"Don't be a fool, Quinn. I'm hit bad and I know it." A sheen of sweat glistened on the wounded man's face. With a spasmodic effort, he tugged the gun he had taken from his sister Ann from his belt and pushed it toward Maricopa. "Here. Without me, you can make it. Fade while you've got the chance."

Maricopa lay very still. Reese was right enough. Even without the sniper holding them down, the marshal probably would die before they could ride the five miles or more back to Gallows Crossing. And freedom now would mean the chance to go on to Corinthia and find concrete proof Hamling had killed Oren Rayburn. There'd be no more walls or bars or Yuma Prison.

Almost without thinking, his fingers closed on the gun, Ann Reese's gun, and for an instant the memory of her shook him like a chill. Twice she'd tried to save him, even if she had claimed it was for Reese's sake. If he could get away now and clear his name, then come back here when enough time had traveled by, maybe he'd find her waiting.

Only then her face was before him once more, the lovelier for the lines of strength and sorrow. Her eyes challenged him, deeper and darker than he'd ever dreamed violet eyes could be, and his own words echoed in his ears, *"You've got my promise. Tom Reese won't die of my bullets, nor of Jud Hamling's, either."*

Another bullet spatted into the dirt as he shifted.

"Get going, you fool!" Reese whispered, beside him. The marshal's voice was weaker now.

Maricopa stared down at the gun in his hand. There was a tight knot in his midriff, a knot that wouldn't go away.

He said, "I'll go, all right, Marshall. But you'll go with me. There's a girl in jail at Gallows Crossing that's counting on you making it back to her in one piece, and I'm damned if she's not going to get you!"

IV

OFF to the left of the draw the ground fell away unevenly, with sparse brush to give additional protection. It was the logical way out, that one that had already caught Maricopa's eye, but it was also a one-way track. Once started on it, there was nothing to do but keep retreating, for the lay of the land gave no chance to swing back to any point from which the bushwhacker might be flanked or crowded with shortgun fire.

Maricopa frowned. Worming around, he surveyed the ground to the right.

Here the prospect was even more discouraging. The hill rose steeply for at least a hundred feet without enough cover to hide a jack rabbit, then gave way to thick clumps of scrub juniper. From there on it was a precipitous wilderness of prickly pear, gnarled stumps and rock ledges.

The only good thing about it was the fact that some of the ledges apparently extended far enough toward Dead Apache Point to make it possible to fire down on the hidden sniper. That was the trail he had to take. He could do nothing for Tom Reese till the drygulcher was routed out.

He turned back to the marshal. "Can you still shoot? We're out of range, but I'm going to need some cover fire to make that hombre up ahead duck."

Reese nodded feebly. "I can give you that, and that's about all. I still say you're a fool."

"I need your boots, too." Tugging them off, Maricopa retrieved his coat from beneath the lawman's head, wrapped them in it, and tied the whole thing into a tight bundle.

"What's that for?"

"More cover. I'm going to throw it down the draw. Just pray it keeps rolling. With luck, our friend up there will figure it's one of us making a run for it. When he starts shooting, you shoot back."

"What about you?"

"I'm going to try to run a hundred feet uphill before that bushwhacker gets his head up." Maricopa looked away. "Here goes nothing."

He heaved the bundle and watched it spin off along the ground. Then the rifle up by Dead Apache point cracked, and Reese fired back, and Maricopa had

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no time for anything but running. Doubled low, he raced toward the nearest clump of juniper, braced for the shock of bullet impact. A slug whined close; then another. Like a cracked whip, lead flicked at his face, and he knew blood was running down his cheek. With a final spurt, he dived into the brush, and lay shaking as the full strain of the sprint hit him.

But he made it, and he was still alive—unhurt, save for the raked cheek. Checking Ann Reese's Colt, he crawled warily toward Dead Apache Point. In mere minutes he was peering down at it through a screen of rocks and greenery.

No one was in sight, though a scattering of brass cartridge cases glinted to mark the spot where the rifleman had lain. Maricopa raised himself higher.

THE Winchester roared, so close the muzzle flash stood out against the sun and it seemed the flaring powder must surely burn him. A bullet seared across his body and through the fleshy part of his left arm.

Maricopa dropped and rolled, then lay rigid through an aching eternity, scarce daring to breathe, the Colt's hammer drawn back under his thumb.

Brush crackled. A fist-sized rock sailed through the air from behind him, landing within a yard of where he lay. Twisting, Maricopa clawed it up and threw it off to one side, so that it rustled the leaves down the slope, ending with a faint rattle that came close to sounding like someone sliding.

Instantly, back close to the spot from which the rock had originally been thrown, a man pushed into view, scanning the grade below. It was the slab-sided, unshaven stranger with whom Jud Hamling had been talking the night before at *Los Tres Hermanos*. He held a saddle gun cocked and ready.

"Drop it!" rapped Maricopa.

Instead, the man pivoted, searching wildly. Then he saw Maricopa and swung the rifle, but Maricopa fired first. The man went over backward. . . . Dead.

Grimly, Maricopa bandaged his own arm, then climbed stiffly down to the trail. Catching the horses where they had wandered, grazing, he rode back to the draw and Reese. The marshal was still breathing, but shallowly, and his eyes were closed. The wound had finally stopped bleeding.

Again Maricopa debated, this time whether to try to carry Reese back to Gallows Crossing in spite of the marshal's wound; or to ride in alone for a doctor. He decided, in the end, to go by himself. He hated to leave Reese, but the strain of five miles on horseback for a badly wounded man was just too big a gamble.

The ride itself loomed as an agonizing, nerve-racked nightmare. Every hoofbeat was a tongue of flame licking at his bullet-spitted arm, every rod of ground a dragging, endless mile. Grimly, Maricopa pushed on in spite of it, cursing Jud Hamling and the sun blazing overhead and the logic that had led Reese to choose this forgotten track for them to ride.

Then, at last, there were houses; stores, and the jail. But it was siesta time and the streets were empty, abandoned to heat and dust and drowsing dogs. A lone lounger stepped squinting from beneath the saloon's marquee. "Hey! Ain't you that hombre Reese was gonna take up to Burdett?" He broke off uncertainly. "Hamling thought you was both dead."

Maricopa said tightly, "Not quite. But Reese soon will be unless he gets a doctor. Where do I find one?"

"Reese is shot? Where is he?"

"I said get a doctor!" Maricopa raged. "Don't stand there! Move! Reese may be dying out on the old Spanish trail right now!"

"Sure, Mister, sure. I'll find him for you. Just let me get you to the jail first. You're done in." Catching Maricopa's good arm, the man guided him into the marshal's empty office and onto the cot in the corner. Half-sick, Maricopa hardly heard the door to the jail part of the building open.

Jud Hamling said, "Thanks, Soogan. This is going to be a pleasure."

MARICOPA twisted and snatched for his gun in the same instant. But fatigue and the wounded arm slowed him. The lounger's weapon was already out. The barrel struck Maricopa's hand a savage blow and his Colt plummeted to the floor unfired. A couple of burly toughs whom he recognized as having been at The Three Brothers leaped forward to seize him.

The lounger burbled excitedly, "Jud! Reese ain't dead, only bad hurt. He's

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out on the old Spanish trail. This hombre tried to send me for the sawbones."

Hamling laughed. It had the brittle sound of ice breaking. His close-set eyes were black as secret sin. "That suits me, Soogan. Go tell the doctor. Send him out there."

The other's jaw sagged. "Huh?"

"Just don't go with him. Cut ahead, cross-country, on the sly and push Reese under if he's still alive. Then clean up any angles that look too raw and fade back to town again. That way, the doctor will be the one to find the body, officially. I like to have solid citizens take care of details like that."

Through clenched teeth Maricopa said, "So help me, Jud, killing's too good for you!"

"But not for you." Again Hamling's eyes lighted with a devil's gleam. He drew a heavy, familiar weapon from beneath his black broadcloth coat. "How's your memory, Quinn?"

"My Navy Colt!"

Hamling handed the gun to the man called Soogan. "Use this to finish Reese. Then bring it back to me." He flipped over his lapel, displayed a badge to Maricopa. "For the record, you're under arrest. You're going to be shot attempting to escape. All legal, too. I'm marshal now. Not all Gallows Crossing officials are as stubborn and stupid as Tom Reese. They saw things straight and appointed me as soon as I told them I had reason to believe he'd been killed."

Turning on his heel, he gestured curtly to the two toughs who held Maricopa. "Come on. Bring this bucko back into the cellblock."

Ann Reese still stood locked in the corner cage. Maricopa heard her sharp intake of breath, caught the panic that leaped in her eyes. Then a shove sent him reeling. He crashed against the bars of her cell, full weight on his bullet-torn arm. Pain turned the world momentarily black about him. He had to cling to the grillwork to keep from falling.

"Hell, Jud, he ain't so tough," one of his captors sneered. "Looks to me like he bruises easy."

Hamling chuckled. "That's right, he's not. And he's not as smart as he used to be, either—are you, Quinn? Otherwise you'd never have come back here."

Maricopa didn't answer. There didn't seem to be anything to say. Behind him, in the cell, he could hear Ann Reese crying quietly, and the very restraint of it twisted at him like a knife.

His enemy went on smoothly, "We're still trying to locate the key to your cell, Miss Reese. And . . . I have bad news for you."

"Yes?"

"The report about your brother being dead is true. My men just captured this escaped convict, Quinn. He confessed that he killed Tom out on the old Spanish trail, trying to get away, and he was carrying a .36 Navy Colt when we caught him. That's the caliber of gun that killed your brother."

For a moment there was silence. Then Ann Reese's voice came, suddenly low and clear and level. "You lie. If Tom's dead, you murdered him yourself, and I'll never rest till you hang for it!"

HAMLING'S shoulders lifted in the slightest of shrugs. "If that's your attitude—" He smiled slyly at Maricopa. "I guess I'll have to arrange an accident for the young lady about the time you try to escape again. Or maybe we'll let her escape, too—to Los Hermanos for a few days with the boys. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Maricopa stood very still. He could feel heat climb his cheeks.

"Yes, I think we'll let her escape," Hamling repeated, chuckling. "I'll enjoy shooting you more, knowing you know it. I can see that by your face right now." He raised his gun; gestured mockingly. "All right. Start escaping."

The two burly gunhands hunched forward — taut, expectant. Ann was sobbing louder now. "Maricopa . . . oh, Maricopa!"

Numbly, Maricopa turned to face her. His arm still pained him, and his throat seemed suddenly too small. He felt old and weary beyond belief.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I tried to save . . . him . . . for you."

She swayed against the bars, clinging to him hysterically. Her hair was awry, and he saw that the violet eyes now were red with weeping. "Maricopa, Maricopa. . . ." She was very close.

Her other hand came out, then—the one hidden in the folds of her dress. He glimpsed a long-barreled Colt. His fingers wrapped round the butt. His brain was all at once clear again, his heart pounding.

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"So long, Quinn!" Hamling taunted.

Maricopa half turned. "So long, Jud!" he echoed, and let the Colt's hammer fall.

A black hole appeared where the bridge of Jud Hamling's nose had been. He tottered backwards till the wall stopped him, then crumpled to the floor.

Maricopa pivoted, still firing. The first of the two bruisers siding Hamling died before he could get his gun from its holster. The second's only shot ricocheted wildly off a bar as a bullet slammed home in his throat.

Shouts slashed through the gunsmoke-clouded seconds that followed. The thud of running feet drifted from the street. Staring men came, walking on eggs, and someone found keys and let Ann Reese from the cell. There were voices, words—Ann, saying, "I brought you two guns this morning, Maricopa. I'd only got one out when Tom came, so I still had the other hidden."

Old Ed Jenkins, the jailer, came hurrying in, gun in hand. "I been hidin' ever since Hamling took over," he explained, "for fear he'd kill me. Any time you want to brag you saved my neck, I'll back you on it."

Then the mayor exclaimed, "That man Hamling had Gallows Crossing where the hair was short, sir! You've done the community a service, and we'll certainly throw our influence toward getting you a new trial. We'd be honored to have you make our town your home!"

Ann Reese. A place to call home. The chance of starting over—yes, it was possible. With Hamling dead, witnesses at Corinthia might talk.

ONLY then Ann whispered, "About Tom—it wasn't true, was it, Maricopa? Tell me you didn't kill him!"

He could stay. But Marshal Tom Reese was her brother, the brother she loved, the brother who'd raised her after their folks had died. And Reese lay dead out there on the trail by now. Reese couldn't talk.

So if he stayed, doubts would stay, too, growing with every passing year. It came to Maricopa, bitterly, that his victory had turned to ashes. A dead man—another dead man—still barred his way.

He said, "I didn't kill him." And then, roughly, to the stranger bandaging his arm, "Get a move on. I'm sick of this town."

A harsh, familiar voice stabbed at him. "Are you crazy, Quinn? What kind of talk is that?"

Maricopa jerked around. He caught Ann's shocked exclamation.

Marshal Tom Reese swayed in the doorway. His face was pale as rice flour under the tan, and pain showed in his red-rimmed eyes. He was leaning heavily on a spindly little man who carried a physician's black bag.

"Tom!" Ann choked. "Oh, Tom, they said you were dead!"

"Hamling tried hard enough. But that fool Soogan Sanders tipped me to what was coming by riding up with his gun out, so I played possum till I could get in the first shot. Quinn, in case you're interested, Soogan's gun was a .36 Navy Colt. If it turns out to be the one Webber converted for you, it won't prove anything, but I'll bet the Governor will be interested."

Abruptly Reese lurched forward and collapsed on the cot. The doctor said, "He's going to live. That slug would have killed anyone else hours ago, but he's got the constitution of a mossy-horned Texas cow-brute. Now clear out so I can work."

Reese opened his eyes. "Not yet. I've got to settle something with that jackass, Quinn." He glowered. "What's this talk about leaving? What about Ann?"

The girl went white to the lips. "Tom!"

"Don't 'Tom' me! I know a woman in love when I see one."

Ann's face turned scarlet. She darted out the door and down the street.

Reese said, "Just remember she's my sister, Quinn. Treat her right or you'll have me to deal with!"

Wordless, Maricopa rose. Very carefully, very deliberately, he made his way to the door.

"Still riding?" Reese demanded querulously.

In spite of himself, Maricopa grinned. "Still riding, Marshal—but just around Gallows Crossing!"

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Next Issue: SORRY SID'S KETCH DOG, a Novelet by WALT COBURN

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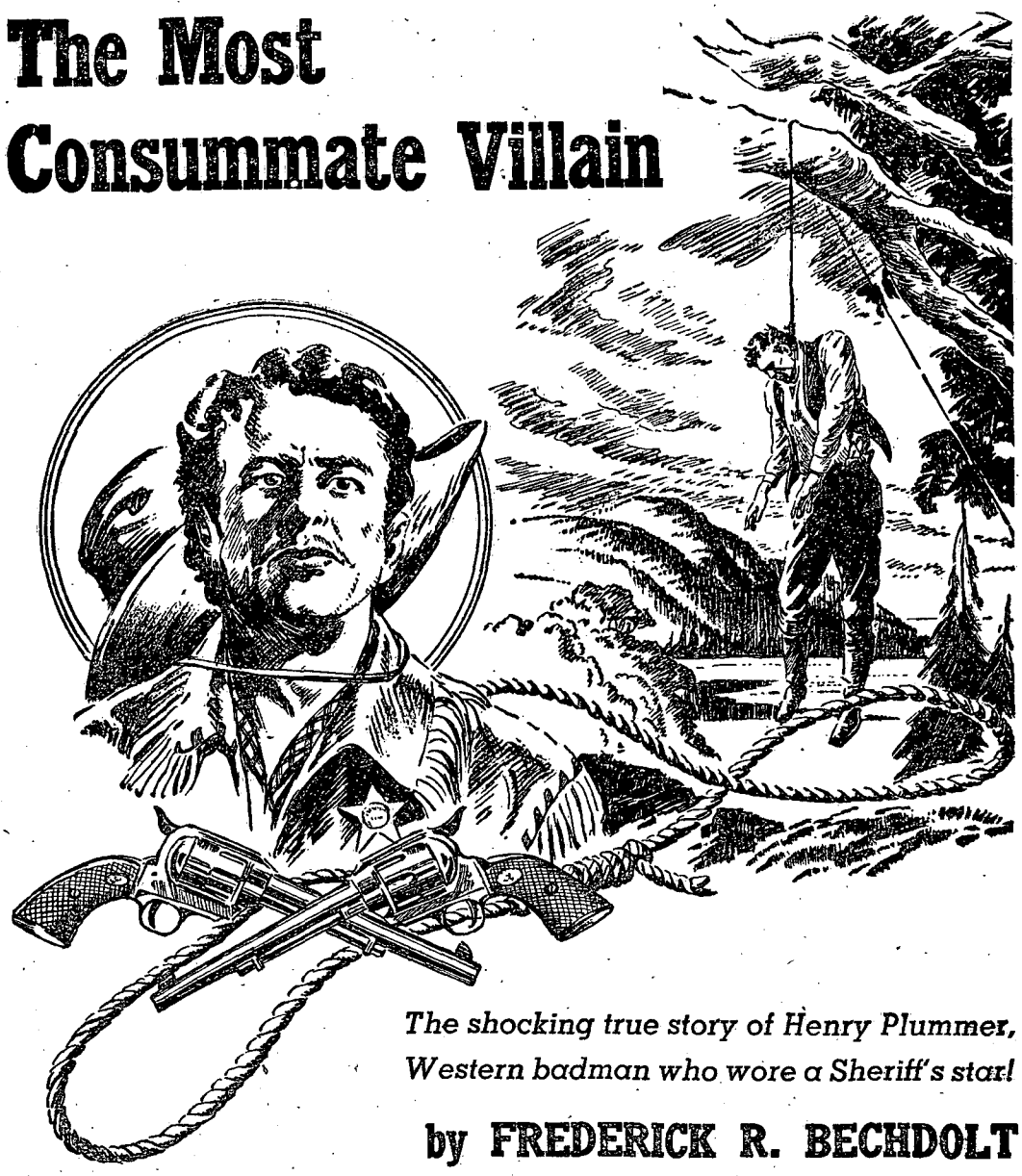
The Most Consummate Villain



The shocking true story of Henry Plummer, Western badman who wore a Sheriff's star!

by FREDERICK R. BECHDOLT

THIS man, Henry Plummer, came to the new placer camp of Bannack late in the autumn of 1862. A nest of lofty peaks in what is now the southwestern corner of Montana enclosed the spot. The wind was moaning, the drifts were growing deeper. Take a good look at him as he appears before this grim backdrop of storms—the most consummate villain in the Old West.

He comes with cat-like tread; still in his twenties, slender, taller than average; well dressed after the picturesque fashion of the placer camp gambler. His feet and hands are small. His lean face shows high intelligence. There never was

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a mouth more firmly held. His voice is always even, passionless. He owns that intangible asset of one born to leadership. But when you look into his eyes you feel a chill.

The eyes of common villains often betray their depravity. Plummer's were more terrible. Their color was the dull gray of old ice, and opaque. They were like the eyes of one without a soul.

Although he had not passed his twenty-seventh year, his trail was marked with blood. Son of a good New England family, he came to California in 1852.

That year he murdered his first man. Then he fled to Washoe, Nevada, where he joined a band of road-agents. With Idaho's gold discoveries, he came northward, masquerading as a gambler. But secretly he was the chief of a band of professional thugs who littered the roads about Florence and Oro Fino with the bodies of their victims until new strikes over on the Salmon River depopulated the camps.

Plummer Shifts Home

The band broke up. Plummer went to the Sun River country, not far from Great Falls. With him went Jack Cleveland, a loud-tongued, black-bearded desperado who knew Plummer's record. It was their intention to take a boat for the States in the spring; but a girl made them change their plans. Plummer wooed her, and they became betrothed.

With the betrothal there rose a quarrel between the partners. Jack Cleveland from this time on was Plummer's mortal enemy. Thenceforth a bond of mutual distrust held these two together more tightly than ever mutual interest had done before.

When the news of rich placer beds on Grasshopper Creek lured Cleveland southward to Bannack, Plummer followed. There is no doubt as to his intentions; Cleveland had been marked for death. From the day of their arrival Bannack was treated to a curious spectacle: a black-bearded ruffian, on fire with whisky, sweating with fear; and the enemy, silent, watchful as a waiting cat.

The camp was in its infancy. Everyone was extremely busy at his own affairs. The narrow street was crowded and lined on either side by log cabins and tents. Here fiddles squeaked, horns blared, bad whisky went across the bars, and chips forever clicked on the gaming-tables.

The same conditions existed in every American placer camp of the time. The reputable element was engrossed in making money, the disreputable crowd was just as busy doing the same thing, and the so-called g a m b l i n g fraternity, formed a sort of connecting link between these two extremes.

From the beginning Henry Plummer was identified with the gamblers. He became a leading citizen. Men sought his advice on public questions and learned to respect it for its soundness. Nor was this respect abated by the fact that the most notorious rascals in the diggings were often seen in his company.

Meantime Jack Cleveland swaggered up and down Bannack's winding street telling all who cared to listen how he was going to kill his former partner. No one concerned himself over the feud. Such things were common in the old placer camps.

At last on a December morning the affair came to a climax. Bad whisky had made Cleveland bolder than usual that day. He entered a saloon where Plummer was sitting with a number of men and flung out a veiled allusion to his former partner's past.

At the time the bystanders did not understand the import of his words. With uncanny coolness Plummer waited until Cleveland was waving his Derringer. Then he whipped forth his own pistol and shot him down.

The man needed killing, according to the code of the Old West. Plummer had played his hand so well that the case would have come to nothing, had it not been for two unexpected developments.

Victim Lingers On

One of these was Cleveland's tenacity to life. He lingered for nearly a day. Hank Crawford, the sheriff of Bannack, took him to his cabin. A dying man is likely to talk. So Plummer's fears were roused anew. Crawford became the object of his hate. How much did the sheriff know? He strove to find out, and —because Crawford knew nothing— Plummer got no answer for his pains. This in turn made him the more suspicious. He determined that Crawford must die.

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At this juncture came the other development. A few days after Cleveland's death, two ruffians, Bill Moore and Charley Reeves, killed a white trapper. Straightway the cry for vengeance rose. The murderers fled, and Plummer went with them, for when the people of a mining community begin to look for rope they are very likely to make a general clean-up without much regard to right or wrong.

A pursuing posse overtook the three fugitives in the mountains. The fugitives surrendered on condition that they be given jury trials.

There were no courts in Montana at that time. Men administered justice in open gatherings. Old-fashioned legal paraphernalia encumbered the jury trial, for which reason it was never high in favor, save with those accused.

That night Plummer's case was heard by a jury, and he gained his acquittal on the plea of self-defense. No one was dissatisfied over the verdict, and all of Bannack proceeded to forget the matter. What every one wanted to know was whether Charley Reeves and Bill Moore were going to escape their just deserts.

The next morning the whole male population gathered in a half-finished log building on the main street. A crowd packed the long bare room: a booted bearded, roughly dressed throng, armed to the teeth.

In the room's rear a narrow space was railed off by bare poles. Here, seated on upturned boxes, were Sheriff Hank Crawford, the two prisoners, and the presiding officer.

Langford Intervenes

Some one made the motion that the case be tried by miners' meeting. A howl went up. The Roughs raised their voices for the first time in Bannack's history, and their yell of protest was appalling in its volume. Then a burly fellow who stood near the rail whipped out a Derringer and leveled it at the chairman.

"Second that motion," he shouted, "and you're a dead man!" A neighbor struck the weapon down. A shot was fired near the door. In an instant the place was bristling with pistols and bowie-knives. A dozen fights were going. The noise of upraised voices was punctuated by revolver reports, and the air was thick with powder-smoke.

While the confusion was at its height a man named Nathan P. Langford pushed his way through the crowd to the railing.

There he turned and faced them, raising his hand.

Order was restored. Roughs began to pay stricter attention. Langford was advocating a jury trial. His argument was simple enough: the posses had pledged their word, and right was right.

A vote was taken, and the miners' meeting won by more than two to one. Still Langford insisted, and in the end, he gained his point. The gathering chose J. F. Hoyt as judge; they named counsel for both sides and picked twelve men to pass on the question of guilt or innocence. Langford was one. The Roughs rejoiced at his selection.

The trial took all day. As the hours went by the lawless element gathered before the railing with drawn revolvers, threatening judge, jury and witnesses alike with death. But the most of their attention the Roughs centered on the jury.

They leaned across the barrier that inclosed the twelve men, brandishing bowie-knives and pistols.

"We'll kill the man who votes guilty!" they shouted.

In the early evening the last argument was finished. It was nearly midnight when the twelve arrived at an agreement. With the exception of Nathan P. Langford, every one of them cast his lot for acquittal. But Langford held out for a death-penalty. At last they reached a compromise, and sentenced the prisoners to banishment.

The banishment verdict was greeted by a whoop of joy. Most of the men who had stood for decency remained silent during the uproar. They realized that the Roughs were to rule Bannack from that day forth.

Within twenty-four hours the thieves and thugs were tightly organized. When leadership of the Roughs was offered to Henry Plummer, he saw an opportunity to bury the secret of his past. He accepted the post and placed Hank Crawford's name at the head of the list of proscribed men. He also undertook the task of killing him.

During the next three months Bannack was in the grip of great fear. Honest men in the camp dared not so much as whisper their suspicions to one an-

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other. The sole idea among most of them was to make a stake and leave the country as soon as possible.

Of the witnesses against Moore and Reeves there were a goodly number. The bodies of several of them were found along the trails that winter. One, who was set upon while he was on his way to work his mining-claim, managed to escape. He reached the Missouri by this cross-country route and got away to the States. Judge Hoyt and Langford, the stubborn juryman, remained in Bannack, but when either of them went out a companion was usually with him, and they walked, literally, with their hands upon their pistol-butts.

Meantime Plummer followed up his project of slaying Sheriff Hank Crawford. This thing had to be accomplished under some guise of fairness. So the cold-eyed leader set to work to pick a fight.

Crawford Proves Wary

However, it takes two men to make a quarrel, and Crawford was wary. He never left his cabin save in company of his partner, Harry Phleger. A dozen times, Plummer had Crawford cornered, but just as he was bringing matters to an issue, Phleger would loom up with his pistol in his hand.

The game went on. At last, as spring was drawing near, all the camp realized that it would be either Plummer or Crawford.

One morning the word went round that Plummer was gunning for the sheriff. Crawford borrowed a rifle from a neighbor just in time to see his enemy taking his stand behind a wagon, with a shotgun. The time for fair play had gone by. Crawford took a snap-shot. The bullet shattered Plummer's right arm.

That night Crawford fled for the Missouri. He managed to outdistance four of Plummer's men who followed him. At Fort Benton, he took the first steamer down the river.

With his departure the camp was without a sheriff. An election was called. The Roughs set up Henry Plummer as their candidate and won.

He took the office and gave it out that he intended to do his duty. The statement was generally believed. One reason for this credulity was his marriage; Plummer's bride was as good as he was bad. Her decency cast its reflection on him, and men said that here was a wild fellow who had settled down. Only a few still cherished suspicions.

Plummer took his next step. He organized such a campaign of robbery and murder as the world has seldom if ever seen since the Middle Ages. Within a year more than one hundred and fifty bodies were found, and no one knows how many more remained undiscovered.

This secret society of thugs had its council-room in Bannack. The password was "innocent." The badge was a sailor's knot for necktie.

Plummer was chief. Bill Bunton, notorious desperado from Idaho, was next in rank. George Ives, scion of a wealthy Wisconsin family, was in charge of the road-agents who did the actual robbing. Boone Helm, a loud-spoken murderer and cannibal; Dutch John, a gigantic highwayman; and Clubfoot George were among the more prominent members.

Several road-houses were established along the stage-routes. These were run by thugs whose business was to pass along news concerning gold shipments and travelers. Clubfoot George posed as a hard-working cobbler at Bannack. When a rich Wells-Fargo box was due to leave, he would get the word to Plummer or mark the stage.

Plummer Robs Stages

As sheriff, Plummer was naturally in the best position to know what was going on. He took part in many of the larger robberies. Whenever he went, he invariably started in one direction, then doubled back across country to the scene of the prospective crime.

Spring came. In Alder Gulch, some sixty miles from Bannack, prospectors discovered the richest bit of placer ground since the days of '49. Before the end of May ten thousand men had flocked to the new diggings. Virginia City and Nevada sprang into being. As sheriff, Henry Plummer held dominion over the new territory and his band immediately enlarged its scope of operations to include it.

Plummer had an honest deputy by the name of Dillingham. He was holding it in good faith, without suspicion of his chief's secret activities, until one day when Buck Stinson, Hayes Lyon, and Charley Forbes came to him with a

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proposition to join them in a robbery.

Then Dillingham's eyes were opened, for these three were close friends of the sheriff. He realized the danger he incurred when he refused their offer and warned one of their prospective victims. The man had a loose tongue. He told the secret that Dillingham had confided to him, and the news came back to Plummer.

That night, by order of their chief, the three conspirators set forth to kill the deputy. They found him the next morning in the midst of a crowd at a miners' meeting. They walked up to him while the case was in full swing and drew their pistols.

"Don't shoot," Forbes cried. It may have been a signal, for the shot was fired. Dillingham fell dead. The three murderers sauntered away.

Dr. Steele, who was presiding at the miners' meeting, headed a posse and overtook them within half a mile. They surrendered. The trio were placed on trial.

Steele took the chair; counsel were named, and Forbes managed to procure a separate hearing on the plea that he had tried to prevent the shooting. The trial of his two companions proceeded, and the crowd sentenced the pair to hanging.

Then Charley Forbes was placed on trial. He was a handsome young fellow, and he talked so well that the gathering acquitted him. This done, they drifted away to watch the execution of his two companions.

By this time the Roughs were getting to work. Lyons and Stinson were standing on a wagon, begging for mercy.

Killers Are Freed

A man leaped up beside them waving a sheet of paper.

"Listen," he shouted, "while I read this letter that Lyons just wrote his mother."

"Aw, give him a horse and let him ride to his mother," some cynic cried when the reader had finished. That brought a laugh. The Roughs seized their opportunity and, while the mob was still guffawing, a leather-lunged follower of Plummer called for a reconsideration of the vote. No one knew exactly what did happen then in the pandemonium that followed.

Some one shouted that the majority were in favor of acquittal, and there was no opposition to his word.

Dr. Steele had gone to his cabin. He was startled by rapid hoof-beats, soon after his arrival, and looked up to see the pair, whom he thought safely hanged, riding past him at full speed. Hayes Lyons waved a mocking hand at him. So the Roughs came to power in Alder Gulch, and Henry Plummer sat in Bannack planning a bigger campaign of robbery and murder.

A Double Life

They say that he was a good husband, that he loved his wife. One can imagine his strange thoughts as he led this double life!

A few men were beginning to realize the part that he was playing. N. P. Langford and his partner, Judge Walter B. Dance, repelled his attempts toward friendship.

Samuel T. Hauser was in business in Virginia City at the time. He, too, had some inkling of what was going on. One day when he was going to take the stage for Bannack with fourteen thousand dollars in gold-dust, he got warning that the road-agents knew of his treasure. His suspicions grew sharper when found that Henry Plummer was to be his fellow-passenger. So, before the vehicle pulled out, he turned the buckskin sack over to the bandit leader, in the presence of several witnesses.

"Here," said he. "You're sheriff. I want you to keep this safe for me." And the gold went through in Plummer's custody.

Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders was one of the first reputable citizens of Bannack to get direct evidence concerning the sheriff's secret activities. A number of business men came to him with word that Henry Plummer was heading a stampede to stake rich claims. Sanders consented to represent these men and obtain good properties for them. He went to Plummer, who tried to get rid of him.

"My friends and I," the sheriff said, "are going over toward Rattlesnake Creek, and we'll pass the night at Bunton's road-house. You are welcome to join us there."

Sanders had no mount. Some time later he procured a horse and started on

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Plummer's trail. Snow had fallen. Sanders had a hard time reaching Bunton's. But Plummer was not there. A stage-robber by the name of Red Yeager was in charge of the place. He had not seen anything of the stampeders.

Sanders put up for the night. Just before daylight more visitors arrived.

These new-comers were half a dozen of Sanders's friends. They bade him leave with them, and when they were on the road home they told him why they had come after him. Young Henry Tilden had been held up twenty miles south of Bannack by half a dozen men, one of whom he had recognized as Plummer, and had brought the news to Mrs. Sanders.

Plummer's Ruse Is Detected

Now, Bunton's cabin lay west of the town. The situation was plain enough. Plummer and his crowd had started out in that direction and had doubled back across country to carry out this robbery. Sanders bade his friends keep their knowledge to themselves and warned the victim of the robbery to say nothing.

These men—Sanders, Hauser, Langford, and Judge Dance—began to compare notes. Neil Howie, J. X. Beidler, John Fetherstun, and a few others joined their quiet conferences. These men belonged to the Bannack lodge of Masons. None of Plummer's men were members. As they discussed the state of affairs, the little handful of citizens began to plan toward putting an end of it. The idea was simple: gather more men like themselves and, when the opportunity came, stand together to force a fair trial.

That nucleus was formed in the summer. Autumn came, and by October there were more than one hundred men scattered through Bannack, Virginia City, and Nevada who were ready to assemble when their leaders said the word and risk their lives in carrying out orders. The number was purposely kept small. It was becoming more evident daily that the robbers had their spies at work in all sorts of places. And the Vigilantes—for so they called themselves—believed that once they got the upper hand, the population would flock to their support.

One day in November Nicholas Tiebalt sold a span of mules to a firm of merchants in the town of Nevada. Because he had a reputation for honesty, the buyers advanced him the price, and he went out to round up the animals on Stinking Water Creek. He rode the black mare mule.

Time passed. Tiebalt did not come back.

Then William Palmer went grouse-hunting in the hills. Toward evening a bird rose several rods ahead of him. It was a long shot and difficult, but he scored a hit. The wounded bird dropped. When Palmer found it, it was lying on Tiebalt's dead body.

The corpse was hidden in a clump of brush. The rigid fingers were clutching tufts of sage. There was a dark mark round the throat—the imprint of a rope. A bullet-hole marred the forehead. Any one could read the story: a murderer in ambush had dragged Tiebalt from his horse and shot him dead.

Robbers Laugh At Crime

Long John Wagner and George Hilderman were living in a cabin a mile or so away. Palmer had no idea that the pair were members of the outlaw band; but when he rode down to the place and asked their help in bringing the body back to Nevada, they laughed at him.

They would have been wiser had they showed less callousness. For Palmer got a wagon elsewhere, and, when he told his story in Nevada, he did not forget to mention them.

A miner identified the body.

"Nick Tiebalt," he said. The wagon was standing in Nevada's narrow street. The tightly packed faces all about grew ugly; a murmur rose.

Several men silently left the crowd and hurried off in various directions. Later there gathered in the back room of a store twenty-five of the best men in Nevada. They sent for Palmer. He came and told how he had found the body.

A man went forth to get horses. Before midnight the twenty-five were in the saddle. Palmer rode with them. At dawn they surrounded the cabin of Long John and Hilderman. Several men were sleeping inside.

"Don't move!" The sleepers awakened at those words to look into the muzzles of a dozen leveled shotguns.

"Where's Long John?" one of the

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Vigilantes demanded. He rose from his blankets and came out to them, and they took him away beyond ear-shot.

"I never saw Tiebalt," he told them.

The growing light was revealing every object on the sage-brush hills. When one of Long John's questioners pointed out Tiebalt's black mule grazing on the slope less than a hundred yards away, Long John broke down.

"George Ives did it," he said, and went on to tell how the chief of the road-agents had murdered Tiebald for his money.

George Ives was among the group down in the cabin, under guard. The twenty-five vigilantes took Ives, Hilderman and Long John back to Nevada. Horsemen raced to Bannack carrying word to Henry Plummer, and the Roughs began to gather for the trial.

On the morning of November 19 the proceedings began. Colonel Wilbur F. Sanders and Charles Bragg were prosecuting attorneys. Alexander Davis and Charles Thurmond represented the prisoner. Ives was tried alone. Long John Wagner and George Hilderman were witnesses against him.

Nevada's main street was packed with miners, merchants, gamblers, thugs. From the beginning things moved swiftly.

The Roughs crowded around the jury-box. But they found themselves facing a line of grim men with pistols in their hands. They made no demonstration.

The jury found the defendant guilty and sentenced him to death.

Pandemonium broke out. It died as suddenly as it had come. The sight of that line of men before the jury-box cowed the Roughs. Colonel Sanders sprang to his feet.

"I move," he said quietly, "that George Ives be hanged!" The chairman put the question, and the miner's court voted, "Aye."

Two men were sent to build a gallows in an uncompleted cabin down the street, exactly like an old-fashion well-sweep. A noose was made fast to this and a dry-goods box placed beneath it for a drop. They took George Ives there under a heavy guard.

He climbed to the box. The street was packed. It was bright moonlight. Now the Roughs made their last attempt.

A shout went up. Weapons flashed in the moonlight. All at once the tumult died away as twenty-five men stepped out before the dry-goods box in a straight line. There came a metallic sound, the clicking of rifle-hammers brought to the cock.

The crowd stood motionless and watched the hanging of George Ives.

They gave Long John his freedom. George Hilderman got off with banishment because he was half-witted.

Then word came that Lloyd Magruder, who had left Nevada for his home some days before, had been murdered and robbed, with four companions, in the Bitter Root Mountains.

The twenty-five vigilantes saddled up and rode forth after Stinson and Lyons, the murderers of Deputy Sheriff Dillingham. The idea was to start a clean-up of the placer camps.

Red Yeager, whose identity as a member of Plummer's band was as yet unsuspected, met them in the hills and managed to misdirect them. They finally reached the camp of the murderers to find that they had fled. On their way back toward Bannack, they got an inkling of the part that Yeager had played and captured him along with John Brown, another member of the band.

Before daylight they had played one prisoner against the other until they got confessions from both.

Yeager gave a complete list of the band's members and of their methods. The vigilantes took the pair to a grove of cottonwoods beside the creek. They left the two bodies dangling there and hurried back to Nevada with the news.

Dutch John Is Captured

Dutch John, who ranked next to Ives among the road-agents, was captured in the hills by Neil Howie, who brought him back the next day to Bannack. Plummer met the captor and tried to take possessions of the prisoner, but when this was refused, he did not dare force matters. He realized that he was walking on thin ice. To a committee of vigilantes, the road-agent made a complete confession, corroborating everything Yeager had said.

Meantime the vigilantes had openly organized in Virginia City, Nevada, and Bannack. Men from all over the diggings were seeking admission. The power of the Roughs had vanished. Henry Plummer read the writing on the wall. His

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wife was in the East. He prepared to flee from the camp.

He had no idea that his name had been connected with the robberies. He went about his preparations slowly.

It was Saturday night when Neil Howie brought Dutch John to Bannack. Then Plummer began to see the need of haste. Buck Stinson and Ned Ray were also in town.

He warned them to make ready and sent to the nearest rendezvous for three fast horses.

That night the local committeemen examined Dutch John. Before daylight a secret meeting was convened. Henry Plummer, Buck Stinson, and Ned Ray were condemned to die.

Sunday afternoon a rider brought the three horses into Bannack for Plummer and his companions. A Vigilante saw him and recognized the animals. He hurried to gather his companions. There was no time for a meeting. A half-dozen men got together and arrested Stinson and Ray.

Plummer was in his cabin washing his face when they flung open the door and told him that he was wanted.

"Be with you in a moment," he said, and started toward a chair where his coat was lying.

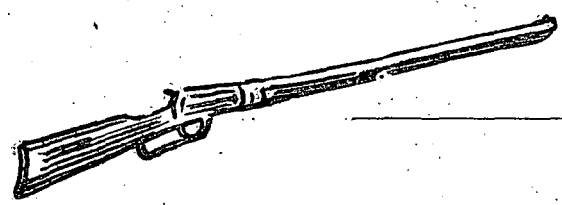
"I'll hand that to you," one of the party told him, and withdrew a pistol from a pocket of the garment as he picked it up. For once, Henry Plummer changed color.

They took him to a little clump of pines near the outskirts of Bannack. Three nooses dangled from a rude framework; his two companions were already standing under them. Fifty armed men surrounded him. He saw these things and fell upon his knees, begging for his life.

Stinson and Ray were cursing their executions. They were coarse-grained thugs; they died with vile words on their lips. When it came his turn, Plummer pulled himself together before they drew him up.

Within a few days after his passing the men of Virginia City hanged six more of the band. For weeks the Vigilantes continued pursuing others who fled across the mountains. They captured them in pairs and singly, and left their bodies swinging from the limbs of trees.

In all some thirty desperadoes went to their deaths. And when the work was done the Vigilantes disbanded. The end of the era of evil really came when those men in Bannack placed the noose around the neck of Henry Plummer.



Next Issue's Featured Headliners!

THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON . . . Jim Mayo

A stirring novel of a man's fight against his outlaw heritage!

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The Village Smithy Stands

Now you have to go to college to shoe a horse!

by ALLAN K. ECHOLS

WITH the stripped-down Model A Ford, and later the jeep, supplanting cowhorses to a large extent on the range, and with the five-thousand dollar specially built trailer trucks supplanting the cattle drive even more, there is one occupation that has suffered almost as much as the buggy-whip maker's.

The horse-shoer has virtually disappeared from the scene of modern life.

The old-time blacksmith was a craftsman of many talents. In his apprenticeship, if it was thorough, he learned to be a carriage maker, and an ironmonger with a good knowledge of forge welding.

He had to know the anatomy of the horse, so that he could make and fit shoes that were capable of correcting natural or acquired faults in the animal's posture. A horse with badly fitted shoes could be ruined in a matter of hours or even minutes.

While there are still a few horseshoers around, not many of them are the products of long apprenticeship, the journeyman's years that the oldtimers went through. And so there is now such a shortage of competent horseshoers that the lack has become quite serious.

Horseshoers — and good ones — are still needed. And because the old system of apprenticeship has gone the way of the buggy whip, something had to be done. And something has been done. Now, if you want to learn to shoe horses correctly, you go to college and learn the trade.

Michigan State College has just started the first college course in horseshoeing. The idea was promoted by the Horse and Mule Association of America, whose members were badly in need of the services of blacksmiths.

The Association is providing scholarships for ten men a year who will agree to work as horseshoers immediately upon graduation. Seventy-five men have already applied for the course.

Soon we can go to the blacksmith's to have our horses shod, and find the smithy's diploma on the wall, stating that he is a graduate M.D.—Doctor of Mules.

Or, we might pass a stadium where there's a tight football game between Sheepshearer's State and Horseshoer's U., and hear Horseshoer's cheering section giving out with some kind of yell like:

"Clip his fetlock,
Trim his jaw;
Rasp his hoofs till they're
Raw! Raw! Raw!"

It's possible!

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THREE

As Byerly flashed his sabre, he heard the sound of firing and knew the troopers were coming

a novelet by

I

IT was an ideal place for an ambush. They sat their ponies in the hollow, fifteen Chiricahua Apaches, wearing red browbands around their black, lank hair, naked otherwise except for breech clouts and moccasins. One of them crawled to the top edge of the hollow, watching the empty road from behind a sheltering mesquite.

The road, scarcely more than a trail, was in sight for a mile or more. It came down the far side of the valley, crossed the bridge which spanned Gila Creek and climbed up again to pass within thirty paces of the waiting Apaches.

The sun beat down out of a burnished brass bowl of a sky. A lone vulture floated in space above, a jack rabbit scurried busily across the bridge and lost himself in the cottonwood trees which fringed the creek. The road remained empty of life and movement for

Jack Marsh, Gambler and Ex-Medico, Faces His

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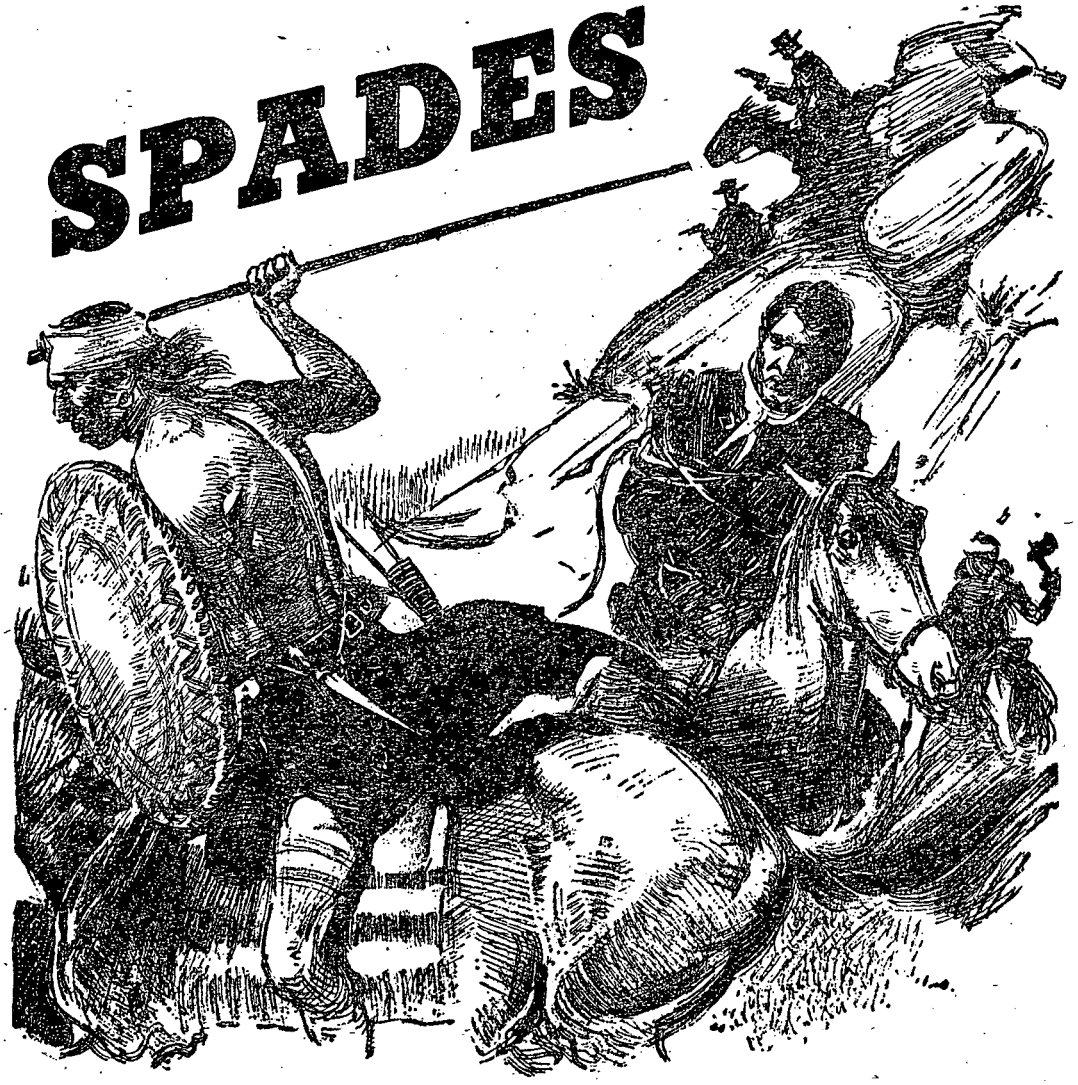
SPADES



MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

a good half hour, during which the Indian on watch scarcely showed the tremor of a muscle. Then, suddenly he tensed and called to the waiting warriors below.

A cloud of dust appeared on the crest of the far side of the valley and began to descend the hill. A faint ripple of movement went through the Apaches in the hollow. They fingered arrows and lances. Those with rifles re-examined loaded magazines. Their leader, a tall half-breed, gave warning and then climbed, catlike, up beside the lone watcher.

The screech of brakes came faintly across the valley as the stage coach showed through the haze of white dust, descending the opposite hill.

The half-breed leader stared at it. There was something strange about the coach. Instead of armed guards—at

Sternest Test When the Bloody Apaches Ride!

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least four men on top—there was only one, seated next the driver.

WHAT the half-breed could not see were the four men and a woman crowded in the dusty interior of the coach, an interior redolent of stale cigar smoke and musty leather.

The woman was twenty-three or four, with a strong, shapely body showing through her tight dress, with dark, smooth skin and deep black hair. Her eyes were obscure, shadowed and reserved. She kept them averted from the three men opposite her.

These three were mustached, slouch-hatted, corduroy-clad. They might have been miners, cattlemen or packers. They kept to themselves, saying little. Two of them dozed, the third occasionally exchanged a word with the fourth man.

This one, who sat beside the girl, was slim, and dressed in rather dandified fashion. He wore a silk shirt and pearl grey trousers. He had white, carefully kept hands, with long sensitive fingers. There was no doubt of his occupation when he brought forth the pack of cards and riffled them expertly, then extended them in a perfect cascade, from right hand to left, without losing a card, following this by cutting and re-shuffling them skilfully. His skin was unusually pale in contrast with the sun-bronzed faces of the other three male travelers. His eyes, when anyone spoke to him, were bright and watchful.

He addressed an occasional remark to the woman beside him but she replied only in monosyllables. His face expressionless, he dealt himself a single hand off the top of the deck, gazed blankly at the five cards, and then put them back and reshuffled and cut the deck again. His frown deepened as he examined them. A third time he went through the same routine. After staring at them a second, he put the deck of cards back in his pocket, staring thoughtfully into nothingness.

I'm jinxed! he was reflecting, *three spades in a row in three hands—that's bad medicine!* Swift pictures formed and dissolved in his mind—that early dawn at college when he had risen from the card table, after a steady run of three spades all night, every cent of his money for board and tuition gone and with them his dream of becoming a surgeon in another six months.

Again, that wild night at Tucson when he had shot young Jimmy Huggins—after a steady run of three spades at the poker table. *Maybe I stepped off on the wrong foot, riding down the stage line yesterday so as to come back with Rose Merril today.*

Rose had been waiting for the coach at Tomlinson's Corners, ten miles back. As he stood there, a tall man, seated beside the driver, had climbed down, lifted his hat and addressed her.

"We're expecting a little trouble along the road from the Apaches, ma'am," he had said. "Unless you're in a terrible hurry, I'd advise you to wait over until tomorrow—it might be dangerous traveling for you!"

She had looked at him level-eyed, fearless.

"I'm not afraid!" she replied. Patiently he renewed his pleas, with the driver from his perch above adding his warning. She was nearly convinced when the nattily dressed gambler came out of the coach, bowed and raised his hat.

"You here, Jack Marsh!" she had said, without friendliness.

"Yes, Rose, and I'm shore glad to see you. What's all this talk about it bein' too dangerous for you to travel?" He looked at the dust-coated stranger.

"I've just been telling Miss Merril that we're expecting an attack. Jacinto is on the loose again and it's likely that he'll try to ambush this stage. It might be dangerous for the lady."

"Listen, Mister — you're Lieutenant Byerly from the Fort, aren't you? I've never seen you out of uniform before. This is a public stage and if Miss Merril wants to ride on it there isn't anyone going to tell her she can't and that's flat. You come along, Rose and I'll see you don't get hurt!"

Maybe I shot off my face out of turn! reflected Jack Marsh gloomily. The lieutenant had stared at him a second then shrugged his shoulders.

"Have it your own way!" he said and turned. Rose Merril had taken a hesitating step forward.

"Excuse his rudeness, Lieutenant." She had jerked a shoulder towards Jack Marsh. "I appreciate your kindness, only I've sort of got to get home tonight and help my father at the store. I can look after myself and I promise I won't be in the way!"

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Jack Marsh had flushed an unhealthy red.

"You don't have to ask anybody's permission, Rose! I tell you this is a public stage and you aren't under the orders of the army!"

The girl smiled placatingly at Steve Byerly. He lifted his hat to her again, and shrugged his shoulders. She halted and watched the lithe ease with which he swung up beside the driver.

Jack Marsh caught the expression in her eyes as she prepared to mount the stage. His thoughts grew blacker at the memory.

ONCE the coach was on its way, she gave him a bad time, staring out the window and turning a cold shoulder to him, an attitude that reduced him to sultry silence. The three other men glanced occasionally at the couple.

Up on the driver's seat Lieutenant Steve Byerly was thoughtful.

"It takes a woman to tie things up in a knot!" observed the stage driver. "Holy Pete, I oughta know, Loot'nent, havin' been married to three of 'em at one time and another! Where yuh expectin' Jacinto to burst loose on us?"

"Anywhere between here and the Fort, but I sort of planned on his jumping the stage when it's crawling up that long hill beyond the bridge."

"Jest about whut I figgered!" The stage driver spat a stream of tobacco juice over the wheel and speeded up his horses until the heavy coach was bounding along.

They were approaching the edge of the mesa, preparatory to dipping down into the valley.

Byerly glanced around the folds of the encircling hills as the stage coach started down the steep hill toward the bridge. Then his eye caught a tiny flicker of movement on the opposite hill.

"They're there!" he said. "Just where we figured they'd be!"

The horses' hooves thundered on the solidly built log bridge as they moved across it at a walk. Once across, the driver turned them to the right, facing down the hill. He reined them in and braked the stage to a halt, the huge, high-wheeled thing stretching across the bridgehead, nearly blocking it.

The driver dropped down and began to unhitch the lead team. One of the mustached, corduroy-clad men within the stage leaped out and took the wheel team. So far it looked like a halt to water the horses. The stage stood there, lonely and defenseless seeming. Steve Byerly put his head in the door facing the bridge, addressing Jack Marsh and the woman beside him.

"We're going to have a little fight," he said. "There are Indians up ahead in hiding. The stage driver, aided by one of my men is tying the horses under the bridge. I'd appreciate it if you would remain inside out of danger, also to keep the Indians from knowing how many are in our party!"

The girl looked at him, wide-eyed.

"Why, of course, Lieutenant!" she answered.

Steve Byerly smiled his thanks, receiving a shy smile in return. It was this that set Jack Marsh off.

"Of course nothing!" he snapped. "Think I'm going to sit here like a hobbled turkey at a shooting match waiting for something to hit me? I can take care of myself, Mister, and don't forget it!"

Before anyone could stop him, he had drawn a rifle from the baggage rack above him and was out the opposite door, peering up the hill, rifle at the ready.

The sight of that white man, rifle in hand, staring directly at their hiding place, was enough for the Apaches. They spewed out, galloping down toward the stage, yelling and firing. But they halted a good safe distance away instead of coming on into the deadly, short-range first of the rifles concealed within the coach.

Steve Byerly, angry and swearing, climbed up on top of the coach to add his rifle to the barking of those below. These were augmented by the rifles of the stage driver and the soldier who had accompanied him, firing from below the bridge. The combined fire took its toll—some four or five Apaches were put out of commission. Then their leader spied that blue-clad line of troopers, a good half company at least, appear suddenly out of the sage brush and mesquite of a fold in the hills, galloping down upon them.

The Apaches scattered like a covey of quail and disappeared. Byerly signalled to the troopers and watched morosely as they rode in.

He swung down from the coach top and came face to face with Jack Marsh,

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standing with the girl on the bridge.

Byerly's face was set.

"Marsh, I've seen some stubborn, non-cooperative fools in my lifetime, but I take off my hat to you! Thanks to you, Jacinto, who just galloped away, remains at large to slaughter more men, women and children and burn more wagon trains and torture more good white men—better white men than you will ever be, Mr. Marsh!"

Jack Marsh watched him with quite bright and quite deadly attentiveness, his hand dropping to his holstered revolver.

"Lieutenant!" he said, "I've never taken that sort of language from any man nor woman in my life, and I'm not going to begin by taking it from you!"

II

IT was too much for Byerly. Even as Rose Merril reached to grasp the gambler's wrist, Byerly leaped upon him, caught the man's arm, jerked him forward and seized the holstered weapon. Tossing the gun into the creek below, he took Jack Marsh by the shoulders, shook him until his teeth rattled and then threw him against the bridge railing where Marsh lost his balance and fell prone.

There was vast approval on the faces of the troopers who had crowded up, including those three clad in civilian garb who had been passengers in the coach.

Jack Marsh rose slowly to his knees, then staggered to his feet, his eyes opaque and slate-colored. He brushed the dust from the knees of his pearl grey trousers, fixing his eyes upon Steve Byerly in an intent memorizing sort of way.

"All right, Lieutenant!" he said at last. "All right, my turn will come!" He climbed into the coach.

The girl looked at Byerly, her eyes wide and expressionless.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," she said at last. Then in a clearer voice that carried into the coach, "He had a lesson coming to him!"

The horses were hitched, the driver back in his seat. Byerly's saddled mare was brought him.

He swung into the saddle. The girl stared at him again as he passed by the window of the coach, the rays of the setting sun making his hair brightly golden. Her eyes were deep and unfathomable as he passed out of sight ahead with his escort of troopers.

The girl and Jack Marsh were alone in the coach. The three troopers in civilian clothes had gone with Steve Byerly.

"I'm going to kill that long-legged, loud-mouthed Lieutenant!" announced Jack Marsh in a strangled voice after some minutes of silence.

Rose Merril turned on him.

"Kill! Kill! that's all you think of, Jack!" Her voice was bitter.

"Oh!" he said softly. "Little Rose has grown fond of the handsome lieutenant!"

"Listen you!" Rose said hotly. "I don't go around falling in love with every man that crosses my path. A girl can admire and respect a man without tumbling head over heels in love with him—and that's the trouble with you, Jack Marsh, you've been asking me to marry you every day for the last six months—even followed me when I was going to visit my sister so's you could ride back with me! Out in this country a girl doesn't have to take up with the first man that asks her to marry him! I'm going to take my time and pick me a real man when I get ready to step out!"

Jack Marsh gazed at her in stony silence for a space. The caliche dust made a fine fog within the coach. The rattle and creak of the wheels almost drowned out his voice, so low pitched was it.

"Now, just what d'you mean by a real man?" he asked.

"A real man—I don't know—but he would have to be somebody who built things up rather than tore them down. He would have to be somebody who was respected by other men—"

"For what?"

"For earning an honest living, for one thing!"

"Nobody has yet accused me of card sharping!" he snapped.

"But is using your skill to win their pay away from hard working miners and ranchers and teamsters honest? No!"

"I suppose you think a dressed up popinjay like the lieutenant, riding around in a fancy uniform, shooting Indians, is the right way to make a living!" He spoke with heavy sarcasm but there was an edge of pain in his voice.

She was quick to note it and her own

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voice lost its hardness.

"No, Jack, there's more to it than that. This is a new country, with settlers and immigrants coming into it and starting to build it up. The lieutenant is helping them by trying to keep the Indians from scalping and murdering them. He's helping them to build. What good are you doing the country? Why Jack, you're just like a gadfly on the back of a plough horse. The horse works to help up a decent country and you don't do a thing to help. Instead you suck his blood!"

"So I'm a bloodsucker!" he said, hoarsely.

The girl went on talking low-voiced and staring out the window.

"You are worse than that! You're a killer! You kill instead of curing! There was that man at Tucson last month, and half a dozen others at different times and places—I know, it was all in fair fight and you are quick on the draw!" she stopped his protest, "but all those men are dead just the same! And you could have been a brilliant surgeon! If only you had finished medical school instead of gambling! The trouble with you Jack, you're always trying to prove something. By gambling and killing you're trying to live down the secret shame of your own failure! I have a lot more respect for a simple soldier who serves his country in the ranks!"

HE glanced at his hands, white, with long slim fingers, the hands of a gambler—or of a skilled surgeon.

"I suppose it's your idea I should join up and be a soldier!" His voice was bitter.

She gazed at him a long minute, thoughtful.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea!" she admitted. Then shaking her head, "No, you haven't got the nerve—and besides you couldn't stand taking orders. You're so proud of your high spirit! I suppose General Lee and General Grant haven't any high spirits! They had to take orders! No, you'd rather loaf and take money from men that work for it. Let Lee and Grant and Sheridan and all of them take orders, you'll be free and independent!" The scorn in her voice was like a whip of scorpions.

"Maybe I'll show you—if it makes that much difference to you!"

She looked at him, startled, then a sudden thought came to her.

"Maybe it would, Jack," she said quietly, " *if* you didn't join up with the idea of getting close enough to kill the lieutenant the first chance you got!"

He averted his gaze.

"Oh, no, Rose!" he said. "You've got me wrong entirely!" and turned a perfectly bland face upon her, the bland and guileless face of a skilled poker player.

A good poker player could make a clean-up almost every night at Chris Bender's saloon in town. That place was the focal point of practically every unattached male with money to spend, within several hundred miles. Men lined up, two deep, at its long bar, with enough left over to keep the faro game, the roulette lay-out and the poker table, liberally provided with customers. Among them were bearded cattlemen, horny-handed miners, packers and teamsters. And tonight there were plenty of soldiers, for it had been pay day at the Fort.

Under the rays of the big oil lamp, Jack Marsh, the sleeves of his fine linen shirt rolled up to the elbows, agile fingers cutting and dealing, reigned over the green baize covered poker table. It was an ornate affair with carved troughs for each player's poker chips, a firm rack for his whiskey glass and an ashtray, with holder, for his cigar.

It was Jack Marsh's kingdom, over which he ruled by superior skill, chilled-steel nerve and an uncanny prescience when it came to cards and card players.

"The difference between a card sharp and a savvy card player," Jack often announced, "is a difference in skill. The card sharp depends on crookedness to clean up—the good card player depends on his superior ability."

Tonight of all nights in the month, was the time for display of that skill. For the soldier pay at the Fort had gravitated by natural stages in barrack room games, to the hands of the few skilled or lucky soldiers, semi-professionals, old hands at the game, who had brought their winnings down for the play-off, the finals, as it were. It was a monthly affair in which thousands of dollars inevitably found their way into the most worthy hands.

But Jack Marsh's normally keen delight in big stakes was lacking tonight. Rose Merril's scathing words in the stage coach, his humiliation at the hands of Lieutenant Byerly, and his own rash

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half-promise to leave this pleasant, easy way of life to take up the harsh and exacting career of a soldier, were all phantoms of disquiet that came, vapor-like between him and the cards and the players around the table. His keen zest in the game was lacking, his handling of the cards was listless and perfunctory. To deepen the fog of gloom which had settled upon him were the chance, overheard words of the soldier onlookers around his chair.

The name of Lieutenant Byerly caught his ear.

"Shure and he's the bye thot kin outsmar-r-t ould Jacinto!" exclaimed one of these. "He's a shar-r-p la-ad is the liftinent—'tis the second toime, yisterday, thot he almost had the ould hellion in his grip!"

"How did Jacinto git away?" asked another soldier.

"Aw, 'twas wan ov thim things thot no one kin gyar-r-d against. The tr-rap wuz all set ond baited, bein' the stage coach, no less, carryin' the month's pa-ay for the rigiment. It was all innocent lookin', wid thray sodjers sittin' inside, guns riddy—but there wuz a ceevilion in there likewise. Ond this thick-headed scut insists upon gittin' oot gun in hand and at sight of him the Injuns vamoose, seein' the thrap before the min of C Coompany followin' along in the hills could git at 'em!"

JACK MARSH, staring, stone-faced at the cards, gave no sign that he heard.

"And how'd the loot'nent take it?" asked another soldier.

"He's a soft spoken la-ad is the liftinent but they do say he blasted loose ond laid the ceevilion flat on his back to reflict upon the evil ov his ways!"

"And serve him bloody well right!"

"He shouldda thrown him into the crick!"

"It'll mean more poundin' saddle leather now, chasin' Jacinto!"

"Jacinto'll burn and torture a lot more good white men afore we ketch up with him again!" came the muttered comments.

"'Tis exactly whut the liftinent tould him. He sez, sez the liftinent, 'Thanks to ye, ye dom fool, Jacinto re-remains at la-ar-rge to kill better white min thon you will iver be, M i s t e r!' sez the liftinent!"

"An he spoke true words there!" commented a sergeant. "Only this mornin' at daylight Jacinto raided the Jenkin's place, scalpin' Jenkins hisself, and burnin' him to death with the slow fire, killin' Mrs. Jenkins and her about to have a baby, and killin' the two Jenkins kids and runnin' off the stock and burnin' the place down!"

There was a grim silence at this news. Jack Marsh stared at the five cards in his hands. Their symbols blurred before his eyes in the hot wave of anger that flushed through him as memory of that contemptuous young officer, Lieutenant Byerly, returned to plague him anew.

"We went out and dug graves for 'em," continued the sergeant. "And I'm tellin' you I'm a man of strong stommick but I was as sick as any raw recruit after seein' whut them devils had done to the woman and the children. I had to lean on my spade for a good five minutes before I could git goin' again!"

Jack Marsh glanced at his hand. Three of the cards were black—all spades! He threw the hand down savagely, refusing to play it.

The talk died down for a space, both players and onlookers absorbed in the bets being placed and the filling of their hands. By an exertion of will power, Jack Marsh got his mind back on the game again, only to have it distracted once more by a chance remark from a trooper newly come into the circle around him.

"Seen old Bill Huggins, the sheriff from Tucson, amblin' into town jest now," he announced.

"Wonder who he's after?"

"Search me—old Bill Huggins don't go shootin' off his face much!"

Jack Marsh dealt the round with hands that did not show a tremor. He glanced with lack-luster eyes at his own hand, then grew tense.

Again he held three spades!

He stared at them grimly. This was getting on his nerves.

The three spades that had always presaged trouble for him were appearing again! And he had drawn two hands of three spades in a row! Plainly the destiny that rules cards and life and fortune, was striving to warn him!

It was time to get away from that place. He called Slim Jim Harris, the extra man who filled in for the regulars and transferred his layout. Then he went to the bar, turned in the house percent-

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age in cash and cashed his own chips.

Big Benny, the porter and bouncer, came from the rear of the saloon.

"Lady to see you outside, Jack!" he whispered, jerking a thumb toward the rear door.

"Jack!" the breathless voice of Rose Merril came out of the shadows. "Bill Huggins—at the store! He's looking for you. What have they got on you, Jack? You'll have to get out of town! He'll be down here in a few minutes! Oh, Jack! why don't you give up this kind of life?"

"It was a fair fight, I swear, Rose! We both drew, only I was faster! Trouble is he was a nephew of Old Man Huggins, and I suppose now the whole Huggins tribe is out to get me!"

"You won't stand the ghost of a show, Jack! Huggins will have somebody watching for you in every town hereabouts and along the river so you can't get into Mexico!" The girl's voice broke, then it grew steady. "There's one place where they can't get you, Jack!"

"Where's that?"

"You can get there in ten minutes—the fort—join up—the army won't give up anybody to the sheriff without so much legal tangle nobody wants to bother. It's your only chance. Get on your horse and gallop out to the fort! Hurry!"

III

IT was nearly an hour later, out at the fort, that Officer's Call had blasted across the silence of the parade ground. A swift follow-up of lights flickered on in barracks and quarters. Booted feet scuffed on gravel as the dark, blue-clad forms of officers converged on headquarters.

There was a rattling of wheels as two ambulances, their four-line teams at a gallop, set off for town to gather up the payday celebrants. Men slipped into field uniform and packed their saddle-bags, knowing that the assemblage of officers at headquarters at such an hour could only mean one thiiig.

In the outer office, Lieutenant Smiley, the regimental adjutant, swiftly checked the officers present, some thirty all told, including Quartermaster and Medical. Then he turned on his heel and opened the door to the inner office.

"All present and accounted for, Colonel. Shall I bring them in?"

"Why in blue blazes d'ye think I sent for them?" came a retort in a querulous voice.

The quick grin that flashed around the faces of the assembled officers disappeared as they stood waiting before the desk of the chunky, red-faced colonel, his blue eyes staring at them harshly, a telegraph form in his hand.

"Department reports Jacinto moving with a large body of Apaches towards Tierra Nova to attack emigrant train!" Colonel Frank Best held the telegram nearly at arm's length as if it were something evil. His high pitched voice went on. "Orders this whole blasted regiment out to intercept, capture Jacinto and save the emigrants! Just like that! Tierra Nova being only forty miles from here—with the regiment certain to arrive after Jacinto has smeared the emigrant train all over the place!

"Why they use axle grease as a substitute for brains up at Department Headquarters, heaven only knows! But those are the orders! Now if Mister Byerly's Napoleonic plan had only worked we'd have Jacinto safe and sound behind bars or buried by this time—I know, I know! If it hadn't been for some thick-headed civilian we wouldn't have to take out eight hundred men and horses to ride forty miles. I'd like to catch that civilian and spread-eagle him on a wagon wheel! I'd like to string him up by his thumbs!"

The Old Man glared ferociously, and getting no response, stared at the telegram again as at some nauseating object, then barked on.

"The Regiment will march immediately. Five days rations and forage in the wagons, in addition to reserve ammunition. Troopers travel light except for extra ammunition. Turn out every man except Post guard. Get every payday drunk into the saddle! Any questions?"

No one spoke among the captains. It was Lieutenant Smiley who filled the gap.

"How about the recruits, Colonel? We've got about twenty-five—"

"Get every man jack of them into the saddle!"

"There's one just joined tonight—doesn't know anything!"

"Get him into the saddle. Nothing like a few blisters on the seat to make a cavalry soldier! Thats all, gentlemen! Join your companies!"

The stirring notes of "Boots and

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Saddles" rang out before all the officers were out of headquarters. An immense flurry of swift and silent activity surged around barracks, stables and Quartermaster Corral. Six-line mule teams were hitched to the canvas covered escort wagons. Troopers began to appear leading their horses, saddles packed.

The rattle of wheels again broke through the gate at Number One Post of the Guard, with voices raised in maudlin song as the payday drunks were unceremoniously dumped off at their respective barracks. They were seized and led to their already saddled horses. The worst of them were doused with buckets of water and the few pugnacious ones knocked down, tied and thrown into the ambulances again until they sobered up sufficiently to be able to sit in the saddles. It was a hard regiment, with no nonsense about it when it came to field service and a pride at being able to turn out equipped for campaign at the drop of a hat.

The strength of the regiment began to show as troopers swarmed into line leading their horses. The brisk ripple of counting fours, interrupted by an occasional drunken hiccough, ran down each company, starting on the left of the guidon.

Impatient troopers growled at the recruits distributed among them, but showed them the trick of cinch strap and headstall and smoothness of saddle blanket and stowage of gear, with the lariat and picket pin looped and strapped and filled canteen fastened.

In "K" Company there was one recruit more exasperating than any of them — awkward, rambunctious and quick-tempered. Jack Marsh, signed up, sworn in and hurried to barracks had a bewildering mass of duffle thrown at him—saddle, bridle, blankets, underwear, shirts, uniforms, carbine, saber and revolver. He had scarcely time to stow his extra clothing away into his locker and get into uniform when the strange trumpet call sent men tramping and hurrying all around him.

AN impatient corporal showed him what to stow in his saddle bags, a trooper helped him pack his saddle, other men, with the contempt of the professional for the amateur, rushed and harried him, until his self-esteem was shredded and his temper brittle.

By dint of much bewildered effort on his own part and aided by the tough, impatient men about him, he at last found himself on line, leading a raw-boned bay horse which cocked a suspicious and saturnine eye upon him. Somewhere in the hurly-burly, a voice barked out something and men began to call out weird syllables, coming down the line toward him.

"Wan! TWO! *thray!* FOAH!" the man on his right boomed in a southern accented baritone. Jack stared, not knowing what was expected of him.

"Wan! Ye dumb idjut!" the Irish corporal bawled at him.

By this time Jack Marsh's brain was incapable of absorbing any more novelties. He stood, angry at the insult and ready to take action against the insulter.

"TWO!" sang out the man on his left and the numbers rippled on down the company line.

"If ye hov no sinse in thot dumb hid of yoors, be dad Oi'll hov to be knockin' some sinse into ut! Ye are supposed to count off the noomber whin your turn comes!" the Irish corporal reproved. A sudden rage swept over Jack Marsh. Dropping his reins, he stepped forward and struck blindly at the corporal.

It was a tactical error of considerable magnitude. The earth rose up and jarred him. Stars, moons and comets coruscated wildly for a space.

He dragged himself dizzily to his feet, with the sound of faint laughter in his ears. There came a quick command. The man on his left shoved his reins in his hand.

"Get goin'!" he whispered.

Half the company in alternate files was moving forward and halting. He moved forward with them. The command came "Mount!" and he climbed wearily and dizzily into the saddle, rocking there until the earth beneath his horse stopped its wave-like motion.

He heard other troopers come up on his right and left, heard the command "Right!" and had no notion of its meaning until someone grabbed his reins and lined his horse up, cursing him roundly until the command "Front!"

Then he saw a dim figure ride in to face the company line, heard the rasping tones of someone else call out:

"Sor, 'K' Coompany! Prisint 'nd Accounted Fer!"

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He saw the dim figure in front return the salute and face his horse to the front, where he saluted another dim horseman, still farther out. This one let out a cry which Jack could not understand but heard a metallic rasp all along what he now saw was an immense solid line of horsemen extending into the darkness on either side of him.

"Draw your saber, you fool!" someone breathed hotly at him.

He made shift to obey, pulling the long cumbersome thing out of its scabbard. There came another cry from in front. Troopers to the right and left of him had strangely raised the hilts of the sabers to their chins, blades far above their heads, and were staring straight ahead.

Another curse came out of the darkness at him and he made haste to attempt the same motion, the blade wobbling back and forth. Then he saw a stout figure on a gray horse ride forward, still farther out, and heard a barked command.

This time he followed the men on his right and left who brought their sabers down and then at another command returned them to their scabbards. All this was complicated and he labored to get the saber's sharp point into that elusive scabbard, with men all about him growling, until he was in a lather of frustration before the infernal thing finally slid into place—and then stuck! He had put it in wrong side foremost and had it to do over again.

Suddenly he realized that the stout figure out far on the parade ground was yelling something uncomplimentary, that nearer horsemen were riding toward him and that practically the attention of the entire regiment was focused upon him.

The figure in front of his own company turned about and rode up.

"Get that recruit's saber in the scabbard for him, sergeant!" said a familiar voice. "He's holding up the whole regiment!"

Someone roughly grasped the hilt of the weapon from him and rasped it noisily into the scabbard. But the clang of that steel was as nothing to the clang of the voice that had fallen upon Jack Marsh's ears.

For it was the voice of the man he hated above all other men—the voice of Lieutenant Byerly!

NOT quite certain, even yet, Jack Marsh hazarded a low question to the trooper on his right.

"Yep—that's Loot'nent Byerly. He's commanding 'K' company — the best commander of the best company in the regiment!" the man said out of the corner of his mouth.

A sharp command came then and suddenly the set of fours of which Jack Marsh was a part, began to swing outwards. Luckily, the old troop horse he bestrode knew what was expected of him and pressed around with his fellows in a gatelike swing that changed the long regimental line into a column of fours, which began smoothly to move out at a walk.

None of the first quick elation of being part of a great moving mass, all pressing forward, which normally thrills a new man in moving out with a regiment of cavalry, came to Jack Marsh. His brain was seething and it was only as a non-resistant passenger that he was carried along, indifferent to movement and sound, to the blending beat of thousands of iron shod hooves, the creak and rustle of leather, the clink and tinkle of sabers, spurs, curb chains and picket pins, which make up the musical accompaniment of cavalry on the march.

Men rode out of the column and galloped ahead, trumpets flapping on their backs, to line up at the Post of the Guard. As the regiment filed past with a crowd of wives and children waving goodbye and the Guard presenting arms, the massed trumpets burst into the favorite regimental field music, a gay and defiant march.

The men had put words to it and they hummed and sang:

"Oh, the monkey married the baboon's sister!
Smacked his lips and up and kissed her!
Kissed so hard he raised a blister!
She set up a yell!"

"Hi!yi! Hiyi!" the trumpets blared forth the notes of the baboon yell. The men sat up in their saddles and sang them. There was a final wave from the wives and the children. The regimental trains creaked and rattled by the massed trumpeters broke formation and rejoined their companies. The regiment was on the march.

This brought no particular comfort to Jack Marsh. Quite the contrary, for

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he was unused to the McClellan saddle and had not learned to adjust his equipment to keep sharp edges and buckles from interfering with his comfort.

It was bad enough for the first twenty minutes of walking, but to a man accustomed to the easy lope of the average western pony, the hard trot of the cavalry horse was a species of torture. It bounced him about and pounded him against the saddle until he felt that another minute of it would shake him to pieces.

It lasted for ten minutes, and then the regiment alternately walked and trotted, eating up the miles at the steady, seven-miles-an-hour cavalry gait. The first hourly halt found him determined to pull out at the first opportunity. No possible danger from the sheriff at Tucson could be worse than the actuality of this experience!

At this halt, men about him straightened saddle blankets and girths, readjusted stirrups and tightened up flopping equipment. But he stood there apathetically until a heavy voice fell on his ears and a heavy hand landed on his shoulders. He turned to gaze upon a fearsome looking individual seen in the dim light of the moon—a huge ape of a man—First Sergeant Brannigan, no less.

"So, me lily-fingered laddy buck! It's standing ye are, dramin' about moonlight 'nd roses when ye should be aboot ma-akin the poor beastie that carries your wor-rr-thless carcase more comfortable! Straighten out thot saddle blanket and tighten thot gi-r-rth before I lose me timper intoirely and blast ye into the middle o' nixt wake!"

Jack Marsh trembled with the anger that surged through him. But he had already tried to argue with authority, with exceedingly poor results. So he turned sullenly to the task set him. Before he pulled out, he promised himself he would, after putting a bullet into Lieutenant Byerly, most certainly drop this loud-voiced ape, with a well-placed shot!

The rest of that night was like a bad dream. Walk, trot, and then, to make matters worse, dismount and lead, until every nerve and muscle in Marsh's frame cried out for rest and soothing quietude. The inside of his legs were raw, a devastating ache caught him in the small of his back. He tried slumping in the saddle but a harsh voice rebuked him.

"'Tis ridin' wid your belly hanging out and your backbone bent thot gives the poor horse a sore back, me lad!" warned that same harsh voice. "We'll hov no sore-back horses in this outfit. The la-ast mon that did, walked and carried his saddle fur thir-r-ty moiles the nixt day!"

IV

SOME six hours of this torture only intensified Marsh's sufferings. A faint streak of light in the east expanded into daylight. The sun came up, ready to set briskly about its day's business, and still they kept going.

In another hour a stir in the column ahead apprised the men of "K" Company that they were nearing their goal.

The smell of blood, smoke and death was already upon the place when the troopers finally arrived. The blue of their uniforms and their yellow stripes, the scarlet and white of the guidons, were alike reduced to one drabness of caliche dust, men and horses sweat-caked and foam flecked. Officers and men stared out of reddened eyes at the wreckage strewn along the valley trail, the burned and blackened wagons with charred bundles of blackened flesh and cloth hanging at queer angles to the still smoking wheels, bundles that had once been men.

Another squadron, and still a third, came flowing down from the hills, silent, dust covered. Each moved with a sudden quick flurry of hooves and the creak and thump of packed saddles into a left-front-into-line, to subside again into immobility, the horses too weary to disturb its stillness by even an occasional tossing of heads.

Despite the fact that they had covered nearly forty miles since sun-up, the colonel turned a frosty blue eye on the last guidon to arrive on line. He growled something to the lieutenant riding at his left and rear, who immediately put spurs to his horse, flashed along the regimental line and came to a halt, saluting before a captain.

"Sir, the Colonel's compliments, and he directs that you straighten out your company on line!"

The captain stared at him dourly, then turning, gave the command: "Right Dress!"

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Not until his troopers were lined up on a ruler-edge level with the remainder of the regiment on the right, did the colonel's command come, echoing along the mesa like the bark of a petulant mastif.

"Prepare to Dismount! *Dis*MOUNT! R-r-rest!"

The thud of some eight hundred troopers hitting the ground simultaneously was not followed by the usual cheerful clatter of voices. The men were too intent upon staring at the carnage before them. Their faces were grim with the shock of sighting those contorted human forms, some fifteen drab objects that had been living and breathing men a few hours before. Only the troopers in the center companies of the long line could see something even worse—the smeared, smashed bodies of the women and children strewn farther out. Women and children after the Apaches finished with them were not a pretty sight. Some of the younger troopers grew violently ill. The older ones cursed softly under their breaths, their eyes hard.

A call came down the line. "Burial details! Front and center! Eight men per company!"

The First Sergeants turned and picked their details. There came a flurry of activity, with more men gagging as they wielded entrenching tools and shovels.

Colonel Frank Best, solid, chunky, and perpetually indignant, stared at the scene with harsh blue eyes.

"Condemned headquarters always call us too late!" His voice was singularly high pitched and whining. "Always sends word at the last minute—forty miles away—what in blazes do they think we are, angels with wings—that can fly here? If there's a single angel with wings in this condemned slack regiment, I've still to find him! Look at that man with the shovel! Handles it like a cub bear handles a fiddle! Here! Give me that shovel—let me show you how to make the dirt fly!"

The Old Man grabbed the thing from Jack Marsh and sweating and puffing rapidly enlarged the grave and deepened it, finally handing back the tool with a disdainful grunt.

"Let's see you do that!"

Jack Marsh, his muscles soft from easy living, too worn-out even to feel a flash of anger at this red-faced old man, dispiritedly took the shovel but could not repress a faint groan as he strove to lift the laden thing.

"Here, man, you're worn out! A recruit, eh? Ridden all night on soft muscles, eh? What company? Speak up man, don't mumble! 'K' Company? That condemned Brannigan has mush where his brains ought to be—sending up a worn out recruit! Get back to your company and stretch out a few minutes. Tell Brannigan to send me another man!"

Marsh looked up, startled, into the eyes of the colonel. He mumbled something of thanks and stumbled away.

Old One-Eye Charley, the Modoc scout, came shuffling up and the colonel turned on him.

"Well! out with it! The Government doesn't pay you for standing around looking wise! How long they been gone? How many of them? Which way'd they head? Jumping Jerushaphet! They'll be half-way to Mexico City by the time you get your mouth open!"

One-Eye Charley, long accustomed to the colonel, calmly squatted on his heels, waited imperturbably until the tirade was finished, then made his report.

"Mebbe so they go 'bout half an hour — 'bout eighty-ninety — Chiricahuas, Kickapoos, Lipans—they head down to the river—"

"Heading down to the river!" The colonel's high nasal whine sounded like a saw going through a knotty log. "And across the river into Mexico, with Garcia waiting there to wipe their little noses!"

He called aloud on the powers that be, giving a sulphuric and pungent outline of Colonel Garcia's ancestry that made every man within hearing halt in rapt attention.

"What good is a treaty with Mexico allowing us to pursue across the line if that illegitimate swivel-eyed son of a Mexican burro tangles up with us every time we cross over—fouls up our patrols—holds up our column to parley and delays us so that every rotten son of Belial of an Apache goes scot free?"

LIEUTENANT STEVE BYERLY had come up, listening absently to the colonel's purple passages with a far away look in his eyes.

"I've got a plan, Colonel," he said when the echoes of the tumult and the shouting began to die down.

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"You — you and your condemned plans!" The colonel turned on him. "You had Jacinto right in your hands and let a condemned loud-mouth civilian smear up the works! What good are plans against Garcia? With any other Mexican officer we'd get friendly help but that blankety-blank Garcia eats loco weed and spits poison! Plans! Schemes! Schemes! Plans! It would take the brains of a Philadelphia lawyer to work any plan on Garcia! What is your condemned plan? Come on, out with it! Don't stand there like a condemned tongue-tied she-mule with the blind staggers!"

The trick, as Byerly knew, was to wait until the colonel ran out of breath and then charge, all out, at full gallop into the opening, talking fast and making sense.

"—the idea being that one company could get through where the regiment couldn't—" he said hurriedly, outlining each step of his plan. The colonel considered, harsh blue eyes half veiled, the small circle of officers standing off at a safe distance.

"But your horses and men are tired! One o' your weak-kneed recruits nearly keeled over here tryin' to lift a shovel!"

"An hour's rest—water and feed—I can leave the recruit behind—" Steve Byerly conceded, knowing that he had made his point.

"All right—get outa here with your condemned company and your condemned plan! It'll be your own responsibility! If you get into a jam don't expect me to haul you out of it by the slack of your pants!"

The other officers stared inquiringly at Steve Byerly as he passed through the little ring. He gave them a broad, unsmiling, wink and strode down to his own company.

Sergeant Brannigan waved the troopers to their horses, and turned as his lieutenant asked him a question.

"There, in the Second Platoon, sor!" he answered and cupped his hands. "Private Marsh! Front and Center!" he bellowed.

Steve Byerly raised his head sharply at sight of the man who wearily stumbled toward him.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "You! How in blazes did you get here?"

Jack Marsh stared at him, saying nothing.

"Here, you, stand at attintion whin you're addrissed by an orficer!" Sergeant Brannigan snapped.

"Never mind, Sergeant!" Byerly waved him away, gazing at the man before him, then said, quiet voiced, "I owe you an apology, Marsh, also a revolver. When I lost Jacinto there at the bridge, I also lost my temper. He raised his voice, calling to his orderly standing nearby with his horse. "Huggins, get that package out of my saddle bags and bring it here." Huggins put the small box in his hands.

Byerly unwrapped it and took out an exact replica of the revolver he had seized from Jack Marsh and tossed into Gila Creek.

"Here's a new gun," he said. "I'm sorry. Why or how you enlisted or how you got into my company I don't know, but if you do your duty like any other soldier you'll be treated exactly like any other trooper, no better and no worse. 'K' Company is starting on a long hard march—the colonel suggests that you be left behind to rest up. It's up to you!"

Marsh took the proffered gun, his eyes hard and bright.

"I aim to soldier like anybody else!" he said and without the customary salute, or waiting for dismissal he turned on his heel and slouched back to his horse.

Sergeant Brannigan stared, outraged.

The troopers swung heavily into their saddles. The horses, ears flopping dispiritedly, moved out. One-Eye Charley, on his pinto pony, joined "K" Company column, grunting that the colonel had sent him along and Byerly was a little cheered at the Old Man's solicitude. The rest of the regiment gazed after the lone outfit curiously before they moved out in the opposite direction.

Byerly led the column of twos along the trail of Jacinto's raiding party, a plainly marked trail left arrogantly, without any trace at concealment, leading directly to the river. Along the route, Sergeant Brannigan took occasion to ride back to where Jack Marsh sat his horse, bowed over the pommel of his saddle, his face drawn with fatigue.

"Listen here, me laddy buck!" Marsh straightened up at the sound of Brannigan's harsh voice. "The nixt toime Oi catch ye slouchin' in front ov the liftinnt 'stid of standin' at attintion as a good sodger should, and the nixt toime I

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catch ye lavin' him widout bein' dismissed and widout salutin' Oil'll ma-ake it me business to knock ye from here to Kingdom Come! This is a good sodgerin' outfit led be the best orficer in the rigimint and be the devil, ye'll learn to mind your manners or Oi'll be braakin' your scrawny neck!"

Jack Marsh stared at him incuriously, saying nothing. But as Brannigan trotted up to resume his place by the guidon sergeant Marsh reached within his shirt and patted that new revolver and was comforted. Let them rave on, he could wait.

V

THE green of river bottom land brought such sharp relief from the harsh light on white alkali dust that Jack Marsh thought a cloud had obscured the sun. Things moved swiftly and quietly. Outguards took station across the river, horses were unsaddled and allowed to roll and crop the grass within radius of their picket pins. The pleasant scent of bacon and coffee perfumed the air and the hour of rest passed swiftly.

A new tightness and grimness came over the troopers as their horses splashed across the shallows of the Rio Grande and shook the water from them, with much rattling of equipment, on the far side. Jack Marsh was elated. Here at last he was safe from pursuit by any sheriff and with the spacious freedom of all Mexico in which to disappear, once he had accomplished that which he had planned to do.

Strangely enough, as he rode up to that far bank among the leading sets of fours, and realized that he was on foreign soil, the sight of all those blue clad men ahead and beside and behind him, gave him a queer feeling of comfort. He had the sensation of belonging, of being an integral part of a group of his fellow countrymen drawn even more closely into fellowship by being on alien ground and venturing among alien people.

It struck him, curiously, that he would be morose departing from them and setting forth alone, a stranger in a strange land. He strove to fight down such sickly sentimentality and forced himself to think of the humiliation he had suffered there on the bridge, before the eyes of the girl. He steeled himself anew to blot out that stain.

Three-fourths of the column was across the river when a shout came from rear. With the others, he stared back and saw a trooper striving to rise out of the water, pulling himself up, white-faced, while his stubborn mount, heated and weary, continued to roll in the shallows. A corporal rode in and tried to aid the man, then shook his head.

"It's his laig! 'Tis broken!" came the corporal's voice.

Lieutenant Byerly halted, dismounted the column, and rode back.

Jack Marsh watched, frowning, as the man was aided ashore, two troopers helping, and then frowned even more as he saw the rough and unskilled manner in which they were attempting to locate the fracture.

He found himself tossing his reins to the nearest trooper and striding rapidly down to the scene.

"No! no!" he cried impatiently, "Let him alone!"

Men stood back, even Lieutenant Byerly seemed relieved at the presence of someone who knew the answers.

"I'd send someone back for an ambulance!" said Marsh with professional asperity. He rolled up his sleeves, kneeling beside the trooper and feeling expertly of the injured leg.

"Compound fracture!" he muttered. "Get me a couple of lengths of boxwood for splints—some bandages—" Men hurried to the escort wagon to bring the medical kit, others began breaking up a box from the wagon while Marsh cut away the boot and breeches and bared the leg. His long white fingers worked skilfully at resetting the bone, bandaging it, applying the splints and tying them in place. He rose at, last, wiping his hands, to find the eyes of everyone upon him.

"He'll be all right until he can get to the hospital," Marsh said absently. He heard Lieutenant Byerly giving orders to carry the patient across the river where he was to be hidden with two men to guard him until the ambulance appeared.

Marsh came back to his place in the column, scarcely noting the change in the men around him.

"Here's your horse, Doc!" said a friendly voice. He was handed his reins and climbed into the saddle as the command came and the march was resumed.

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LIEUTENANT BYERLY rode by him on the way to the head of the column.

"Good work, Marsh," he said, "Glad we've got some one along who knows doctoring!" and was gone. For doctors and Medical Corps men were scarce as hens'-teeth in that Southwest Territory and the rudiments of first aid had not yet been made part of military instruction.

As for Byerly, that temporary setback disposed of, his mind turned to the problem ahead, to Jacinto and his possible moves.

Jacinto would be about four hours ahead, he reasoned, taking his time. The half-breed believed himself free from pursuit, and he was slowed up, in any case, by the booty he had seized in his raid.

The column moved through sage brush and chaparral, then across an open mesa, with hills ahead some three or four miles. It was while scanning these that Steve Byerly saw the signal.

It was a succession of small puffballs of smoke, rising straight up in the windless air, in quick succession.

He did not need One-Eye Charley's grunted word beside him to know what it meant.

"He say enemy in country!" said Charley.

To Steve Byerly, staring at those smoke signals, there came one of those periods of clarity when earth and sky stand still and all livings things seem transparent and unsubstantial. There descended upon him a feeling of deadening futility.

Jacinto had sighted him and was forewarned too soon. The half-breed leader would undoubtedly signal for more allies and increase his forces, also notifying Colonel Garcia, who would waste not a moment in starting his delaying tactics. Behind him, Steve Byerly had only fifty troopers.

Turning in his saddle, Steve found the eyes of the men fixed upon him calmly, trustfully, waiting his action. At sight of their quiet confidence, his temporary paralysis of will suddenly dropped from him.

He lifted his voice, giving the command. "Trot! Yee-o-ow!" The column flowed into swifter motion behind him.

Sergeant Brannigan's voice came down the column.

"Sicond Platoon! Relave point and flankers!"

There came a flurry of galloping hooves and a corporal and seven troopers went by at the gallop, heading out to take over the arduous duties of the advance guard. Steve Byerly noted as they passed him, that the trooper on the off-side of the first set of two's was Jack Marsh, his face drawn with fatigue, his eyes straight to the front.

Without command the rear pair of troopers debouched off to the right, to take over that flank, while the next pair headed for the left flankers. About halfway to the point, a single trooper was dropped off as connecting file, while the corporal and the two troopers remaining, galloped on to the front.

The old advance guard waited until the column caught up with them and resumed their places in the First Platoon. All of this done smoothly and quietly without interruption of the steady forward progress of the company, winding its way through Spanish bayonet and cactus without faltering or changing gait in the slightest.

As they approached the foothills, the corporal leading the advance guard slowed down to decrease his distance from the column, and rode into the rock strewn valley.

"Keep a sharp eye out, Doc!" he cautioned Marsh who was riding ahead, looking neither to the right nor left. "The trick of keepin' your scalp on your head is to see the Apache afore the Apache sees you!"

Marsh gave no sign that he heard, his mind being upon other matters.

It was because of this that he passed that small draw leading up to the right without giving it even a cursory glance.

Leading the column, about five hundred yards behind, Steve Byerly entered the valley mouth in time to see it all.

HIS first glance, sweeping the center sides and rim of the valley, told him that something was amiss. The right and left flankers were making their way, rising and falling along the foot hill hummocks at the edge of the valley floor like small boats in the surf of a tempestuous sea. Nearing the far end of the valley and several hundred yards ahead, Jack Marsh, the right-hand man of the point, swung his horse about suddenly.

Something about that small draw to

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the right had registered itself on Jack's consciousness and strove to sound a warning to his preoccupied mind. Not until he had ridden several yards past did the insistence of that warning, at last, force him to heed it and he turned his head and stared over his shoulder.

What he saw paralyzed him for a second before he jerked his horse about. It was like a nightmare, the swift growth of the sheen of sunlight on that patch of dark, oiled skin. The patch enlarged suddenly into the sinewy chest and shoulders, the leathery face, lank black hair and glittering eyes of an Apache warrior, emerging out of a screen of chaparral, tufted lance poised for the casting.

It was more than ever nightmarish, the seemingly slow drawing back of that oiled mahogany arm, the forward movement of the slender lance, its steel point glittering, the thing growing larger as it hurtled toward him.

It was Marsh's frightened horse that jerked away so that only the feathered tuft brushed his cheek with the faintly caressing touch of death deferred. The chaparral became suddenly alive and malignant, with dark horsemen who flowed toward him silently, their eyes fixed upon him, blank, incurious, with a stony, reptilian intentness.

It seemed to him that he heard his own voice shouting a warning but it was as though it came from outside and beyond him somewhere before the wave of horse and Indian flesh surged around and engulfed him.

A rawhide riata settled over his shoulders and caught the carbine he was raising to clamp his arms to his sides. His reins were jerked from his pommel and his horse reared to the jab of a lance tip. It leaped forward, snorting, but herded within the group of ponies and evil smelling riders, as they swept up the draw.

Lieutenant Steve Byerly had sounded the gallop the second he spied the sudden halt and turn of Jack Marsh's horse. So swiftly did the wave of Indian horsemen appear and disappear up the draw with their bound captive that he had scarce made a hundred yards before they had gone.

"Sergeant Brannigan!" he called above the thunder of hooves. "Follow up the draw with the company! I'll try to head them off above!"

He waved to the leading four troopers who broke out of column after him as he set his mare at the hillside, directing her diagonally back and forth in an upward crisscross.

She was a three-quarter thoroughbred, slim and graceful as a deer and she went up the hill like a deer fleeing from the hunter, lightly, her hooves spurning the earth, bounding like a thing of steel springs.

The troopers' horses labored after, heavily, the distance between them increasing with every second, until at last, with one final splendid leap and scramble, she stood, flanks heaving on the crest.

Steve Byerly checked her, glancing back. The four troopers were only halfway up the slope. On the far side he saw that he was ahead of the band of Apaches far down below, who were straggling out and following the tortuous windings of the draw, glancing behind them from time to time. It heartened him, showing that Sergeant Brannigan was in close pursuit.

In swift decision, he made up his mind to charge down alone before the advantage of his position was lost. He swung the mare down the steep slope, heading her for a point that would intersect the line of the Apache flight below.

VI

THE mare rocketed, stiff-legged, down that steep hillside, in a welter of sand and gravel, coasting on her tail on the steepest going. Steve loosened reins and gave her head. Ears pointed forward, eyes alert for every obstruction, she avoided jagged Spanish bayonet and cruelly barbed catclaw bush, outcropping rock and sentinel cactus.

As Byerly and the mare plunged three-quarters of the way before rounding an obstructing elbow of the hill, the Apaches below sighted them. They lashed their ponies into greater speed and there burst from them the sharp crack of rifles, reverberating through the hills.

Byerly measured the distance still to go, then glanced up the hill behind him, seeing the first of the four following troopers putting his horse gingerly at the steep slope. There was no time to wait for them—even now the Apaches

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were speeding up and would soon pass Byerly on the trail below.

He turned the mare sideways and speeded her across the face of the hill at a gallop, risking a nasty spill in every yard of progress. But the mare kept her footing and he quartered her down toward the trail.

They struck it in a cloud of flying pebbles and Byerly drew his revolver and galloped straight at the leading two Apaches as they rounded a great boulder.

A bullet smacked across a flat rock beside him and went screaming away in the deadly wail of a ricochet. Other bullets whined above and about him. The soft "wheet" of an arrow sounded too near.

He lowered the revolver, timing his aim with the descending extension of the mare's gallop and pulling trigger before the rise of the next bounding pace. The foremost Apache clutched at his pony's neck and swayed off his pad-saddle onto the ground. Byerly ducked the questing, thirsty lance tip of the second and put a bullet into its wielder's chest at arm's length.

His mare reared, forefeet striking out at the three Indian ponies who blocked the way. A rifle cracked almost in Steve's face—he squeezed his revolver trigger, the muzzle jerked up and a scaly Apache face became strangely smeared. Someone struck at him with a tomahawk, its glittering arc descending just as he fired. The revolver bullet must have hit the Apache in the heart for he collapsed and was borne out of the way on his frightened pony.

The third warrior was striving to reload his rifle when the lieutenant's shot split open his jaw and left a welter of teeth and blood.

"I am aiming too high!" he thought, and steadied down to use his last two shots more carefully. There were three Apaches now across the trail. Behind them he saw Jack Marsh, swaying, bound in the saddle.

Steve dropped his revolver muzzle to the waistline of the nearest warrior and let go, noting that the Indian flinched as at the blow of a heavy fist and clutched at his entrails. In his anxiety to make the last shot count, Steve grew overtense. He cursed softly as, after the gun jerked in his hand, the Indian pony reared and screamed.

He was on top of the Apache now and brought down his clubbed revolver with a blow above the ear, seeing the warrior crumple and fall from his plunging pain-maddened pony.

Jamming his revolver back into its holster, Byerly drew his sabre. The long Solingen blade came out with a dry whirr and he flashed it out in front as he bore down upon Jack Marsh's captors.

One of them raised a tomahawk to brain the captive. Byerly saw the glittering thing rise up and spurred his mare forward, lunging over her withers with his sword. He felt its chisel sharpness slide into flesh and jar against bone. With one last defiant yell, the dying warrior flung the tomahawk at his attacker but so weakly that it bounded off Byerly's shoulder harmlessly.

There came the sound of firing from behind the small group of Apaches. A shout came from above and glancing up, Steve saw the four troopers zigzagging down the steep slope, carbines in hand. The remaining Indians, seeing their danger, rode at the lone white officer. He rose in his stirrups and drove at them, the long blade of his sabre a glittering arc of steel about him.

The sight of that feared "Long Knife" the popping of carbine fire behind them from Sergeant Brannigan's force and the appearance of the troopers above them, suddenly convinced the Apaches that the game was up. They swarmed up the hillside out of reach and plied quirts and bridle ends to their ponies as they fled up the trail.

Steve Byerly caught Marsh, just as the man fainted from the combined effects of a blow on the head, the hot sun and the closeness of his escape from death.

It was Sergeant Brannigan, riding up, who found his lieutenant dismounted, canteen in hand, applying cold water to Jack Marsh's white face.

MARSH was sullen when he came to, ashamed of having shown weakness.

"Feel all right now, Marsh?" Steve Byerly's voice was kindly as he rose, canteen in hand. Jack Marsh sat up, finding the eyes of a score of troopers upon him and Sergeant Brannigan standing near at hand.

"Yeh! I'm all right!" Marsh grunted.

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It was too much for Sergeant Brannigan. He waited until Steve Byerly was out of ear shot, inspecting the dead and wounded Apaches with One-Eye Charley.

"Whin ye spake to the liftinent, me laddy buck, ye'd bist addriss him as 'Sor' hereafther or Oi'll be teachin' ye manners wid the business ind of a stirrup leather—ispicial as the liftinint has jist sa-a-aved yore wor-rthliss hide from bein' skinned off ov ye aloive, be the Injuns! Hod ye been payin' attintion to your business 'stid a ridin' along wid your nose in the air and yore moind in the clouds, the Injuns would not hov jumped ye wid the da-a-anger to the company ye risked. 'Tis the sicond toime, my laddy buck, thot ye've let the liftinent doon! Seein' thot ye owe him your loife 'nd limb and bein' sa-aved from torture 'tis toime ye figgered thot the thir-r-d toime ye should be doin' somethin' for him instid!"

Jack Marsh stared, silent, at the first sergeant, his eyes bright, hard and watchful.

"Spake oop!" Brannigan raised his voice. "Will ye remimber thot the liftinent has sa-aved yore wor-rthliss hoide and will ye be afther thryin' to do somethin' for him nixt toime?"

"Yes! I'll try to do something for the lieutenant next time!" said Jack Marsh at last, his voice as smooth as though he were dealing a round of hands at poker.

What more Brannigan would have said went unspoken for a trooper who had been placed on rear guard came galloping up.

"Wheah at is the loot'nent?" he called. "Theah's a hull passel o' Mexican calvary aheadin' up this way!"

"How minny?" asked Brannigan sharply; signalling to the troopers to mount.

"All of a hundred Ah reckon!" the trooper called over his shoulder as he galloped up the trail.

Lieutenant Steve Byerly took the news quietly.

"That's our friend, Colonel Garcia!" he said.

One-Eye Charley grunted, as he stood by a captured Indian pony, the dead body of its former rider strewn across the trail. Sergeant Brannigan rode up, the column behind him. Byerly mounted his horse and fell in at the head of the column.

"Colonel Garcia?" asked Brannigan. Byerly nodded and led the way up the draw. Brannigan, beside him, motioned point and flankers out.

Both men turned as One-Eye Charley rode up. The Indian scout had divested himself of his uniform and wore breech clouth, leggined riding moccasins and red browband like any wild Apache. He was astride a captured Indian pony, riding it Indian fashion with one-rein hackamore and saddle pad.

"I'm sending him to Jacinto to ask for a pow-wow," explained Byerly. Sergeant Brannigan's eyes widened. "Charley tells me these are Jacinto's men—that they're heading for San Fernando where Jacinto hangs out. All right, Charley—Red Butte!" He motioned to the scout who rode on at a lope, disappearing around a turn in the trail ahead.

"A pow-wow—wid thot murdherin' baste!" Sergeant Brannigan was shocked.

"It might work," explained Byerly soberly. "As soon as Charley reports back, I'm going on in alone and try to reason with Jacinto—"

"Beggin' the liftinent's pardon, 'tis jist throwin' away your loife! Wan man goin' in there alone would not stand the ghost ov a show, sor! Two moight git away wid it—ispicially if the sicond mon is a mon who is quick wid his gun and his wits loike Oi am, sor!"

Byerly kept a straight face. "I'd sort of thought of that," he said. "It would mean that Sergeant Lovett takes over."

"And no betther mon could be found, sor!" Both men knew that Lovett had been a major in the Confederate Cavalry and would be an officer now were it not for regulations against Confederate officers holding rank in the regular army.

"Call him forward, sergeant!" said Byerly, without betraying in the slightest that he had planned things to work out just in this fashion. He had a lot of confidence in Sergeant Brannigan's loyalty and courage but a lot more confidence in Lovett's ability to lead an independent command and use his head.

LOVETT was a slim, soft-voiced Virginian who handled his horse well. He listened gravely as the lieutenant explained his new responsibilities in considerable detail, with many a backward glance to see if the Mexican outfit was in sight yet.

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"Ah'm to take the company and soht of lose the Mexicans at the fuhst oppohtunity," he repeated his instructions in detail. "Very well, suh!" He saluted at Byerly's nod and reined up gravely, waiting for the column to catch up with him.

They came to where the draw widened out and split into two small dry arroyos. Byerly picked up his reins and with Sergeant Brannigan moved into the left hand arroyo, waiting until Lovett came up with them.

"Send a messenger as soon as you've shaken them off—up that way, sergeant!" Byerly pointed. "Take over!"

He returned Lovett's salute as the column went up the right-hand way and the two turned and moved rapidly up the other arroyo.

At the head of the arroyo they dismounted and hid their horses in a clump of chaparral and watched and waited. The Mexican column went by, loosely riding men in dark blue uniforms, wearing big sombreros, carrying their cartridge pouches in bandoliers across their chests.

"So far, so good!" grunted Byerly as the last of the Mexican column disappeared from view without a glance at the left hand arroyo, intent on following the company ahead. "We'll head out for the Red Butte."

They struck off to the westward, keeping below the skyline and moving cautiously to avoid any wandering Mexican or Indian eyes.

After two hours they came to the great red sandstone cliff and rode beyond it to a spring-watered valley where they off-saddled, watered and grazed their horses, broiled bacon and made coffee.

It was not until the shadows of the afternoon lengthened into velvety dusk that old Charley, imperturbable and silent as a wraith, appeared. He hobbled his horse and squatted on his heels beside them.

"Him say come on!" announced Charley calmly.

Byerly considered this for a moment.

"Nothing else?" he asked at last.

"Him say everything friendly."

"Does he speak true words?"

"No!" said Charley, flatly. The lieutenant and the sergeant stared at each other for a quiet second or two.

"Well, I have to take a chance. You'd better turn back, Sergeant. No use risking two lives."

"'Twould be desertin' in the fa-ace ov the inimy for me to be tur-rnin' back now," wheedled Brannigan.

Byerly shrugged his shoulders.

They waited, then for the messenger from Lovett and the company.

Just before dark, old Charley, on watch, came back.

"Him come now—that loco feller!" He gave no further explanation.

Brannigan peered as the lone horseman came into the meadow and dismounted. It was Jack Marsh.

"Now why in the na-ame o' the Howley Saints, did Lovett sind ye, me laddy buck?" asked the big sergeant before Marsh had a chance to report.

"He asked for a volunteer. I volunteered!"

"Ond he let ye go—thinkin' it was safer fur the company to hov ye as far awa-ay as possible, bad cess to him! Well, coom out wid it—whut's the message?"

Marsh made some sort of an attempt at salute, turning to Steve Byerly.

"Sir, Sergeant Lovett says—reports—that he couldn't shake off Garcia's men by daylight but will try again after dark and will try to carry out his orders."

Steve Byerly took the news in silence.

"Shure, and it's larnin' to ack loike a sodger, ye are!" Brannigan broke the silence at last. "There's bacon 'n cawfay there. Feed yoresel' but fur the loife ov me I can't figger whut we'll be doin' wid ye. To sind ye back alone is flyin' in the fa-ace of Providence fur ye will be losin' yoresel' foriver, wandherin' about at night . . ."

"Could I go along with you?" asked Jack Marsh, pausing as he munched a piece of hard tack.

"Go along wid us! Mon, ye'd be walkin' into your death as loike as not!"

"No matter, could I go along?" He turned to Steve Byerly who was writing in his notebook.

"If you want to take the risk," said the lieutenant. "It's about six to one and half a dozen to the other." And he continued his writing.

Sergeant Brannigan drew a deep breath, started to say something, then thought better of it and went off, mumbling to himself, to saddle his and the lieutenant's horses.

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Steve Byerly finished writing his message, called One-Eye Charley and handed it to him, speaking for a moment, then watched as Charley rode away and lost himself in the darkness.

In a few minutes more he and the first sergeant and Jack Marsh were in the saddle, headed for San Fernando, the three of them riding in silence.

VII

THAT silence persisted for miles, with no sound except the faint thudding of hooves and the slight clink and jingle of equipment. They came at last to the edge of the hills above San Fernando, the few dim lights of the small barrio twinkling below them.

The winding trail led downward through a rock-strewn gully. It was when they were about halfway to the bottom that Steve Byerly's mare raised her head alertly, her ears pointing forward. From behind her on the trail, Jack Marsh's horse gave a shrill whinny. Sergeant Brannigan swore at the animal but all three men tensed uneasily in the saddle, striving to see what had disturbed the horses.

It was then that the avalanche struck them.

A solid mass of horsemen, ebon black in the darkness, fell upon them. The silence of the preceding second exploded into a bedlam of yells. A wave of Indian ponies smashed into Byerly's mare and he felt her lose her footing on the trail and frantically try to regain it, only to drop beneath him, rolling into the dry water course. A sharp pain shot through his left arm as the weight of the mare held him down and he tried to quiet her struggles despite the agony of the arm caught beneath her.

Smelly dark figures jerked him out and drove the mare to her feet. His revolver was snatched from its holster and a noose slipped over his arms and tightened, sending waves of pain through the broken arm. He was half carried and half dragged back on the trail and hoisted up into the saddle of the frightened mare, his legs tied beneath him.

"Brannigan! Marsh!" he called. A bony hand struck him across the mouth.

"Thanks be to Gawd, liftinint!" he heard Brannigan's voice, a note of pain in it. It was followed by the sound of a blow. There was no word from Jack Marsh.

Their captors led them down the trail toward the barrio and Steve Byerly reasoned that Jacinto had jumped the gun and assured himself that nothing should prevent the arrival of his victims.

They came to level going at last and their Indian captors lashed the horses to a gallop, rapidly arriving at the collection of adobe huts, with *serape* clad Mexicans stirring sleepily out of their hovels to watch.

A large adobe building loomed before them, dim lights shining through its iron barred windows. Byerly figured that it was the military headquarters of the place. Coming through the big double gates he looked for sight of Mexican soldiers and saw nothing but Apaches. He wondered if the soldiers were all out with Colonel Garcia, pursuing Lovett and the column of troopers.

He decided they must be when he saw a tall, dark skinned man, evidently a half-breed, clad in a military blouse, but with breech clout and moccasins beneath. Byerly knew then that he was gazing upon Jacinto himself.

For the first time he saw Jack Marsh, riding bound beside Sergeant Brannigan. Brannigan's face was pale in the dim light of the lanterns.

Jacinto gave a guttural command and the three white men were jerked off their horses and herded through a doorway. Brannigan was swaying. A large, dark patch of blood discolored his blue breeches. Their Apache captors shoved and pushed them with rifle muzzles into an adobe-walled room, its floor covered with straw and fagots and other debris more malodorous. A lantern was hung above the open doorway. An Apache, his face pitted with smallpox, squatted down outside it, rifle across his knees.

Marsh was seemingly unhurt except for a torn and bleeding cheek from some glancing blow. He stared a second at Sergeant Brannigan and the blood welling down his leg. Then he spoke sharply.

"Let's see that wound!" he said. Both men gazed at him, hopefully. Again this was a different Jack Marsh—keen, capable, professional. He rolled up his sleeves as they watched, removed Brannigan's belt and uncovered the wound, a deep lance stab in the thigh from which the blood was coming steadily.

"Lie down, here!" he ordered. Bran-

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nigan, startled, obeyed him.

Marsh turned and sought through the debris on the cluttered floor, coming up with a small stick of wood. He took Brannigan's belt, fastened it loosely around the thigh, then pulled a large handkerchief from his pocket, made a compress and in a few swift motions had it in place, the tourniquet tightened and fastened.

"Relax and lie still, now!" he ordered and rose to his feet. Turning, his eyes, still with that detached, professional brightness, swept over Lieutenant Byerly and came to rest on the limp arm. In another second, Marsh's long, slim fingers were gently probing and feeling. Byerly flinched in spite of himself.

"Broken!" commented Marsh. "Here, I'll help you off with your shirt!"

He lifted and pulled, carefully and skillfully, until Byerly was in his sleeveless undershirt. Again Marsh examined the arm, head bent to one side. Then, turning, he sought once more amid the debris until he found a flat piece of wood.

His own outer shirt came off then and his undershirt which he proceeded to tear into strips. He turned to Byerly.

"Better sit down," he suggested. "This is going to hurt a little!"

Steve Byerly gave a wry smile.

"Now I know you're a doctor!" he said and seated himself on a bench against the wall.

CLAMPING his jaws together to prevent any exclamation of pain, Steve felt the probing fingers move along his arm, felt a second's excruciating agony as the jagged bone ends were fitted into place, then watched the smooth, skilled manner in which Marsh put the splint on, tied it and wrapped it with the bandages, then made a sling in which to rest the bandaged arm.

Not until this was finished did Marsh tend to his own torn cheek, putting a small compress on the wound and fixing it in place with a bandage across his forehead and the back of his head.

Sergeant Brannigan looked over, gratefully, at the man who had given such skilled aid.

"Shure, and it's ould Brannigan who's misjudged ye entoirely, Marsh, and should be givin' thanks to the Howley Saints thot ye came along wid us!"

"We'd have been in a pretty tough spot without you, Marsh!" said Byerly.

The words had a strange effect upon the gambler. All the brisk, capable air of the skilled professional seemed suddenly to desert him. He stared from one to the other, again with that hard, bright, attentive air, then turned about, without a word, and found himself a seat in the farthest corner of the room.

Sergeant Brannigan broke the uncomfortable silence, speaking to Byerly.

"We're in a tooough spot in anny case, liftinint. It looks as if ould Jacinto was plannin' to raise merry Hades wid us in the absince o' Colonel Garcia!"

"Doesn't it!" echoed Byerly absently, staring out the open doorway into the patio. Some peons were moving a litter of broken barrels, crates and bottles from before a high adobe wall. Along the wall, at about the height of a man's chest, the adobe was pitted and scarred with a line of bullet holes, attesting to its frequent usage as the backstop for a firing squad.

As he watched, another peon came into view carrying on his shoulder three long-handled shovels. He had started to drop them, when a voice came from somewhere, giving an order. The peon resumed his burden and shambled toward the door of the room where the prisoners were confined, dropping his burden with a clang just outside.

There was, as Byerly recalled, a pleasant, old-fashioned Mexican custom of making the condemned dig their own graves. He stared at his useless arm, then dug into his waistband, brought out his watch and studied it. A shadow darkened the doorway just as he returned it.

The tall form of the half-breed, Jacinto, stood there, reaching for the lantern and holding it up the better to see his captives.

"Ho!" he exclaimed, "So verree nize of hees *amigos* to coom and see Jacinto! Jacinto verree good-weeth his *amigos*—Jacinto's *indios* like verree mooch to make sport weeth *los gringos* weeth *fuego* and knives 'nd othair tortures but Jacinto say 'No'. Eet ees *mucho malo*. Jacinto verree beeg *hombre* along weeth Colonel Garcia—Jacinto," here he drew himself up and thumped his chest, "Jacinto *teniente* and no ees posseeble for *teniente* to make torture, all same *Indios!* So Jacinto, weeth beeg *corazon*,

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heart, how you say? he feex eet so *gringos* die queek weeth bullete! *So*, eef the *Senors Gringos* weel be so kind now and take shovel and deeg hole for dead mans, everyting weel go queek!"

He reached down behind him and drew the three long handled shovels into view. Jack Marsh, staring at them, went white.

"Three spades!" he whispered.

Steve Byerly stumbled to his feet. The grave-digging provided a ray of hope, a delay.

"Anything you say, Jacinto!" he shrugged his shoulders and then repressed a grimace of pain. Jacinto saw the grimace and stared down at the bandaged arm. From that he turned to where Sergeant Brannigan was stretched out on the wooden bench, the tourniquet on his thigh. At the last, Jacinto stared at the bandage on Jack Marsh. Then he came into the room and examined each bandage in turn, a strange expression on his face.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he exclaimed, "*'Sta uno medico-aqui?* Ees doctaire here?"

The three prisoners gazed at him, silent.

"Queek!" His voice rose. "Tall me, *mi hijo* ees muy seeck! My son ees verree bad, much hot all over—eef gringo medico make heem well, gringo doctaire go free! Wheech wan ees doctaire?"

He turned the lantern rays on first one, then the other. All three looked at him, expressionless.

"We'll tell you which is the doctor and he will cure your son only if you let us all go free!" said Steve Byerly. Sergeant Brannigan nodded approval. Jack Marsh stared straight ahead, unseeing.

Jacinto shook the lantern angrily.

"No! No! I tall you eet ees impossee-ble! *Los Indios* weel keel *todos*—everywan eef they not see some *sangre*—blood! Wan onlee—*el medico* can go free!"

"He's probably right!" commented Steve Byerly and would have turned to Jack Marsh, except that Jack swiftly interposed a word.

"Tell him to leave us alone ten minutes and we'll decide!"

"*Si! Si!* I go 'way—" Jacinto had understood him. "I coom back *pronto*—ten minutes—yes?"

He turned and was gone, leaving the three alone.

VIII

As Jacinto stepped out into the patio there came a low undertone of guttural Apache voices.

"The brat probably has only a little malarial fever," Marsh said in a queer, clipped tone. "Anyone of us could cure it—I have some quinine in my saddle bags. I suggest we deal three rounds of poker hands. The first two that draw three spades stay behind—the winner acts as doctor. In case we each draw three spades in any round, lowest spades are out!" He took a pack of cards from his pocket and began to riffle them.

"You're be way of bein' a professional gambler, Marsh!" Sergeant Brannigan suggested.

"A professional—but a straight player!" Marsh blazed at him. Then he handed the cards to Byerly. "Cut and deal!" he said.

Steve cut them, awkwardly, with his one hand, then dealt them out, each man picking up his cards and studying them. Steve Byerly picked up his hand last. His face was impassive as he read them.

"Cards face up!" he said and laid down his five. The hand contained a three, a six and a seven of spades. He glanced over at Sergeant Brannigan's hand. It held a deuce, a five and a queen of spades.

The two men looked at Jack Marsh. His face was working strangely.

"By Jupiter! The jinx is broken!" he breathed. Byerly and Brannigan stared uncomprehendingly, glancing again at his hand.

It held a small straight flush of hearts.

"Don't need any more dealing—you're the doctor, Marsh!" said Byerly.

"Two more rounds if you like!" said Marsh, his voice strangely remote, his eyes staring off into space. The two others said no, it was a fair deal. Marsh picked up the cards absently and shoved them into his pocket.

"Delay all you can, Marsh, in fixing up the kid. Maybe they'll hold up our little ceremony until you get through—and every minute counts!" advised Byerly. Marsh made no reply. The three sat silent, waiting.

Jacinto's form blocked the doorway.

"There's your doctor, Jacinto, to cure your son!" said Byerly, and pointed at Marsh. Jack got to his feet.

"Medicine's in my saddle bags!" he

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said curtly, and without a glance at the other two, walked past Jacinto and out into the patio.

Moving toward the saddlebags, he saw the line of half-a-dozen Apaches in odds and ends of Mexican army uniforms lined up, rifles in hand, lounging by that bullet-pocked wall.

With the worn black leather medicine case in his hand, he followed Jacinto out of the gate. Turning, he saw Lieutenant Byerly and Sergeant Brannigan being led forth, each of them carrying a shovel. Before he entered the door of a small adobe house on the opposite side of the road, he saw the two men being marched out the gate, past the sentry to an open plot that already contained several headstones.

Jack Marsh went in, following Jacinto to a sparsely furnished room. Two Mexican women were huddled around a low pallet upon which lay a boy of seven or eight years, tossing, feverish, bright-eyed and moaning.

Jack Marsh took out his thermometer, shook it, and placed it in the boy's mouth, holding it gently in place. Jacinto and the women watched him spellbound. With his other hand, he held the pulse, his watch beside him on the blanket.

After a time he took forth the thermometer and read it. He shook his head gravely.

"He is very sick!" said Marsh, and opened his medicine case. "But I can cure him—at a price!

"Price—price—you talk price!" Jacinto raised his voice. "I geef you your life—ees not price *bastante*—enough?"

"No—it is not enough!"

The boy on the pallet moaned.

"*Ay! Ay! mi pobricito!*" cried Jacinto. "Queek! tall what ees your price?"

"A very small price," said Jack Marsh. "Those two *gringos* who are about to die are enemies—*enemigos*—of mine. I have sworn to kill them with my own hand! You will give me your revolver and I will kill them in their prison before I give your son a drop of medicine!"

"Dog of a *gringo!* I keel you myself!" Jacinto tugged at his revolver. Jack Marsh shook his head.

"Do you want your son to die?" he asked. "Come, bring him with you so we won't lose any time in giving him the medicine. It is a small thing to pay —the killing of two *gringos* for your son's life!"

TO their surprise, Steve Byerly and Sergeant Brannigan were called off their task of digging their own graves before the job was one-fourth completed. They were led back to the patio. As they passed in the gate they saw the line of Apaches with the rifles, still waiting.

"This is it!" said Byerly. But Brannigan was staring at something else.

"Whut in the na-a-me of the Howley Saints is thot!" He pointed at the strange group by the door of their cell.

In the lead was Jack Marsh, revolver in hand. Behind him, carrying in his arms a feverish looking Mexican boy, was Jacinto. Back of them were several worried-looking women, wringing their hands.

The two prisoners were led past this group into the cell-room, Marsh staring at them, bright-eyed and attentive.

Marsh followed, and Jacinto, with the boy in his arms.

"Put him there on the bench—it is not good for him to sit up!" Jack ordered. "And cover his eyes so that he shall not see that which is about to take place!"

Mystified by this strange *gringo* who insisted upon murdering his own countrymen, but convinced, in any case, that all *gringos* were unpredictable, Jacinto placed the boy tenderly upon the long bench, put a neckerchief over his eyes and straightened up. It was then he felt the cold steel muzzle of the revolver digging into his side.

"I want to cure your son," said Jack Marsh quietly, "but I'll put one bullet into him and the next into you if you make a single move!"

Jacinto stood, blankly staring.

"Slip off his belt and tie his hands behind him, Sergeant Brannigan. Lieutenant, stand by the door. Jacinto, tell the sentry outside to hand in his rifle and cartridge belt!"

In a choked voice, Jacinto, the fear of death upon him, called the order to the sentry. Lieutenant Byerly took the proffered gun and the bandoliers. Brannigan silently made fast the belt around the half-breed's wrists.

"Now I will cure your son!" said Jack Marsh. Handing his revolver to Brannigan, he went to the door and called for

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"Agua!" Taking the dripping tin dipper that was brought him, he worked over the boy gently, giving him the powders and tablets.

He rose at last. "That's that!" he said. "Now what, Lieutenant?"

Byerly took out his watch again and brought it under the lantern. "If One-Eye Charley got through with my message, it ought to be any minute now!"

He snapped the case of his watch. The three waited, silent, listening. Byerly's eyes studied Jack Marsh, whose gaze, in turn was fixed upon Jacinto's son, all else forgotten but doctor and patient. Jacinto himself had squatted beside the small boy, resigned and incurious.

From far off there came the faint crack of a rifle. The single shot set off a sudden clamor of shooting and high-pitched yells, growing louder. Lieutenant Byerly and Brannigan heard another sound — the high pitched notes of a cavalry trumpet, blowing the "Charge!"

Both men sighed contentedly and relaxed, waiting and listening to the growing chorus of rifle fire and the business-like crack of carbines, the yells of cavalry troopers and thunder of hoofbeats and the drumming of unshod ponies in flight.

A FLASH of dusty blue and yellow appeared in the patio gateway—behind it the scarlet and white of guidons and a white-mustached, red-faced colonel gazed down from his horse.

"Well, I had to pull you outa this by the slack of your pants after all, Byerly! You and your Napoleonic schemes and your rat trap and bait—"

"We caught the rat, Colonel," Byerly interrupted, jerking his head to where Jacinto was being brought out, bound. "We were the bait while 'K' Company is out somewhere leading Colonel Garcia on a wild goose chase!"

And for once, the old colonel was at a loss for words.

* * *

Back across the river once more, their homeward route led the regiment through the town. It was Byerly who sighted among all the enthusiastic townspeople, the girl on the porch of the store. He called Jack Marsh up.

"That three thousand dollar reward for the capture of Jacinto—colonel wanted me to claim it—" Jack Marsh got this so far but what followed was incomprehensible — "figured it enough for you to finish medical school." Jack heard only disjointed phrases and strove to fit them together, listening, his mind foggy. "Colonel will arrange furlough—get degree—Army surgeon—marry that girl on the porch over there—take her with you—" Jack saw a dark-haired figure, anxious-eyed, watching the column ride past, then heard Byerly's voice again. "Drop out of column five minutes, speak to her—if you'll answer one question—how come you passed up your last chance to finish me off back there in Jacinto's jail?"

Jack Marsh saw Rose Merril's eyes—questioning, anxious. Something like a clean, cool wind blew through his being, utterly driving out the dregs and the bitterness and the dead sense of futility that had been his for so long a time. He picked up his reins.

"Well, it's like this, Lieutenant." He omitted any reference to the three spades in a row and the jinx that had at last been broken—nothing about the girl who had begged him to change his ways. His face lost its strained look of fatigue. It settled into something detached, professional, keen, as he pulled out of column. "Those were a couple of pretty good dressings I put on you and Brannigan—seemed kind of a shame to spoil 'em. I guess they made me figure out it was about time I stopped killing and started curing!"

Three Great Western Action Novels—RANGE BEYOND THE LAW by WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE, COWBOY by ROSS SANTEE, and THE HERMIT OF THUNDER KING by JACKSON GREGORY all in the August issue of TRIPLE WESTERN! Now on sale, only 25c per copy at all stands!

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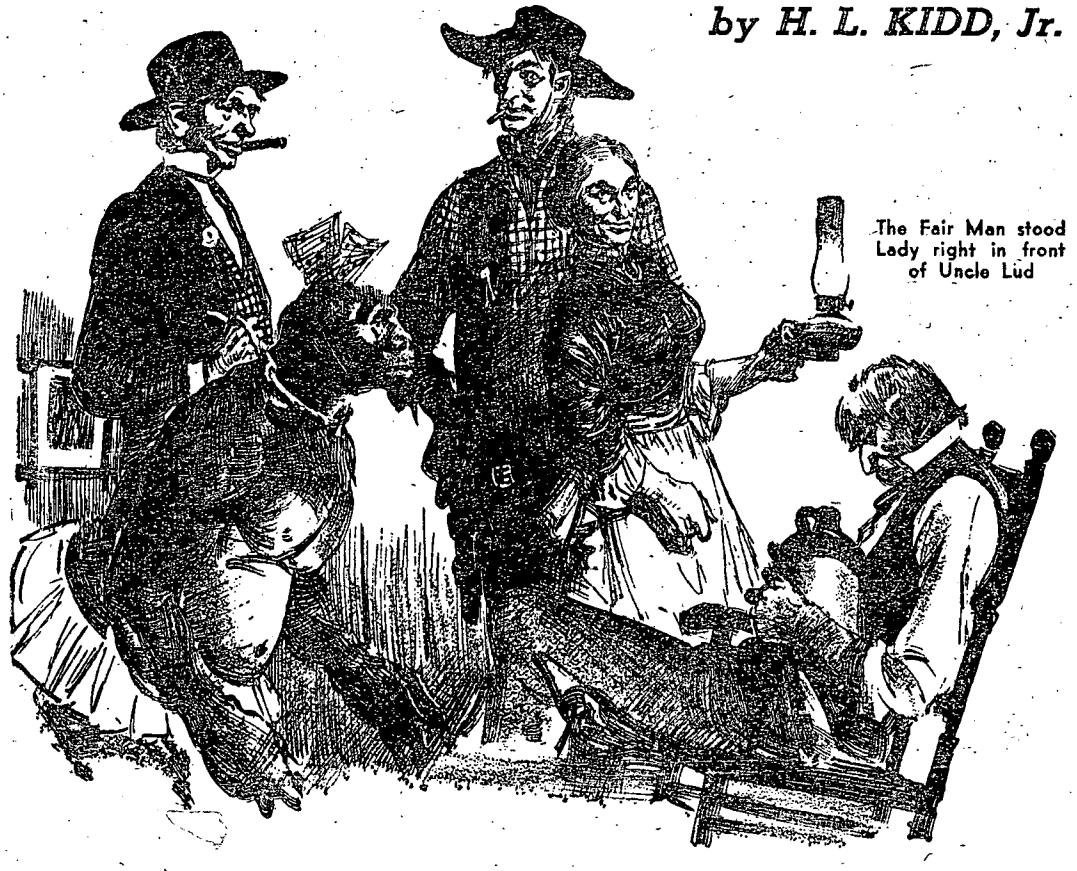
by H. L. KIDD, Jr.



The Fair Man stood Lady right in front of Uncle Lud

Getting Uncle Lud out of that old white-lightnin' habit was no cinch

You Wouldn't Believe It!

MY Lud ain't got but just them two weaknesses," Aunt Lettysue has said many a time. "He's been a good man in the saddle and a better one out—in his day. But the way drinkin's got him down now, I kind of wish he'd git on back to woman-chasin'! Poor Lud—he shore gits a worse hangover out of them bottles than he ever did out of ary blonde!"

She was right cute about it, Aunt Lettysue. But my Cousin Eddie, though, seemed like he didn't take none too well to his ma's jokin. Eddie kind of had a right to gripe seeing Uncle Lud had started giving his waking hours to serious drinking long about the time Eddie hit fifteen. And for better'n seven long old years Eddie'd been running the place singlehanded and devil a bit of help out of Uncle Lud, no matter how many cows was festered up with the screw-worms or needed feeding in the middle of a blue norther.

It was right down hard on Eddie. And he fair put in the time trying to hit on some way to break Uncle Lud away from his bottle, too. But no dice. Up to last

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fall, anyway, Eddie might as well of tried to sober up a Brahma bull in fly-time!

But then, you know how it is. They ain't no hoss that can't be rode and they ain't no rider that can't be throwed! And just about the time Eddie was ready to flat give up, Old Lady Luck set down in his lap, and he managed it. Him and me and Aunt Lettysue and the Fair Man and that there she-ape named Lady, all put together.

I could tell something lucky was goin' to happen the very minute me and Eddie turned off the main road into the fair-grounds the first day of the fair last fall. Because we no quicker got inside the gate than here come this old terrapin crawling along down the left rut, just like he was headed for the fair with the rest of the folks. Eddie turned him upside-down with his boot-toe and sho now—they was clover-leaf markings on the bottom of his shell!

"Leaf-belly terrapin, Bub," Eddie said, grinning. "Good luck and a dry spell—everywhere 'ceptin' up to our place, anyway!"

"How come you say that, Eddie?" I asked him. "Uncle Lud gone to bed with the jug again?"

"Yep," he said, frowning a little and kind of shrugging his shoulders. "I reckon I ain't never goin' to git him over that old white-lightnin' habit! I've about give out on trying!"

HE kicked the terrapin out of the rut so it wouldn't git itself mashed up and start a spell of rain for the fair, and we went on up to the main part of the grounds. It wasn't no great shakes of a fair—about the same as we have every year. But they was a little bit better rides than usual. And they was a couple of real good-looking redheaded kootchers wigglin' around on a little wooden platform in front of their tent.

"Hot dog, Eddie," I told him. "Let's git a couple tickets and go inside and see what else them kootchers can do!"

But Eddie he never even heard me. He was looking around the edge of the tent past me and his eyes was sticking out on stems.

"Lordymighty, Bub," he said, real excited, "that there thing sho never growed in Texas!"

"It ain't no good, then—whatever it is!" I told him. "Come on—let's us go watch the kootchers!"

But no dice. Old Eddie he was long gone. So I give in and follered him over to where a big bunch of fellows was shovin' and starin', and I be dog if Eddie wasn't right. They wasn't no kootchers this side of Dallas could of kept a man's interest up very long, compared with what was over there.

It was a little roped-off space and in it was this here Fair Man. He had on a frock-tail coat and a checked vest and a black preacher-come-to-meeting string tie. And he had one end of a long shiny chain in his hand, and at the other end of the chain was the godawfulest-looking varmint I ever did see. It was a big old hairy she-ape, all dressed up like a bally-dancer, with kind of pointed red shoes on and a little red skirt flaring out from under its belly and a piece of a veil tied over its head and under its neck.

It was one more sorry-looking sight. And they was a good-sized sign stuck up in the ground that said:

LADY—THE DANCING GO-RILLA!

LADY DOES:
THE POLKA THE WALTZ
THE SCHOTTISH
AND
CLASSICAL INTERPRETATION OF
THE RUSSIAN BALLET

LADY IS:
THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED GO-RILLA ALIVE TODAY!
AN EDUCATIONAL FEATURE

GENTS 50c
WOMEN AND CHILDREN *FREE!*

Sho now—you could of knocked me and Eddie over backwards because they wasn't no carnival at none of our other fairs that ever had ary go-rilla, much less one that could do the schottish and all them other things.

So the man seen we was interested and he give us and all the rest of the folks a little talk and the go-rilla kind of capered around for a minute or two and then he took it in the tent in back of him and come right out and started selling tickets.

"Come one, come all!" he hollered. "Only fifty cents, gentlemen, to bring yore wives, mothers, sweethearts and children to see this marvelous educational feature! See Lady, the dancin' go-rilla—Africa's contribution to Amer-

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ica's culture! See Lady—the leading animal exponent of the terpsichorean art!"

WELL, me and Eddie figured they wasn't no use in our letting such a opportunity slip by us. So we give the man the money and went on inside. It was some show, too, on account of that there go-rilla named Lady was real smart, and mighty near as nimble as a lot of the women hereabouts, at that. But long about middleway of the show I noticed Eddie kind of settin' forward on the edge of his seat with his eyes shining like they do when something gits on his mind.

"Looky here, Eddie," I whispered to him. "What you settin' there grinnin' about?"

"I done had one more good idea, Bub," he whispered back.

"What about?" I told him. "You ain't goin' to try to pull nothin' on that there go-rilla, are you? If you are, you just forgit you ever knowed me! That there thing could plat the two of us into a ketch-rope, if it was to take the notion!"

Eddie looked real hurt.

"Why, Bub," he whispered, "you know I wouldn't do that go-rilla no harm for the world and all! But I sho Lord done had me a good idea!"

He wouldn't say no more right then. But after the show was over and all the people was goin' out of the tent, he told me what he'd been thinking. And I be dog if he hadn't figured out a pretty fair scheme at that.

So me and him went up to where the Fair Man was helping the go-rilla out of its clothes so it could kind of relax itself a little bit, and we hit him up with our proposition. At first he was a mite skittish.

"I don't rightly know, gents," he told us. "Lady is a mighty hard-workin' go-rilla. And I doubt if she'd like the idea of traipsin' all over the county between shows!"

"Now don't git no burrs under yore saddle, mister," Eddie told him. "All I want is to git that there thing over to my place long enough for my drunk pappy to have a good look at it. If that won't fair break him offen the jug, they ain't nothin' will this side the open grave!"

"Sho Lord—that's a fact!" the Fair Man said, laughing fit to kill himself. "Still and all, I got my business here to think about. Me and Lady wishes you well—but we ain't got time to drag all over Texas trying to git people to quit their drinkin'. We got to eat!"

I knowed Eddie had him then, and Eddie he seen it too.

"Looky, mister," he told the Fair Man, "this here's a serious matter with me, and I ain't askin' no charity. How much you figure you're going to make up here tonight?"

The Fair Man kind of scratched his head.

"Not too much, to be honest with you," he said. "They ain't no money in a educational feature in this part of the country. Maybe thirty-forty dollars, I reckon."

Eddie retch back in his hind pocket and come up with his billfold. He opened her up and pulled out a couple fifties.

"Mister, if it's true money talks, I'm puttin' up a right strong argument," he said. "You ain't going to be here but this one night nohow. So how's about you working for me instead of for yoreself? I done sold six—eight calves today, and I figure I can stand the cost of one good treatment for my pappy, anyway!"

Well, it just taken that Fair Man one grab to snatch them bills right outen Eddie's fingers.

"Son, you done convinced me without ary other word," he told him. "It's really a pleasure to hire out to you!"

That was that, then. And we set down and laid our plans. After we got things settled, the Fair Man went outside and pulled up his stakes and ropes and took the big sign down and hung up a little one that said CLOSED on the tent. We started waiting for it to git good and dark.

After awhile it did, and me and Eddie figured we might just as well git at our business. So the Fair Man put all them fancy clothes back on his go-rilla and he put that little old chain back on her neck. And we all of us sneaked out the back end of the tent and cut acrost through Old Man Broaduses south section and came up the hill to Uncle Lud's place. They was a lamp burning in the front room and I figured Aunt Lettysue was likely wondering where me and Eddie was by this time.

SHO 'NOUGH, she came hotfooting it to the door the very minute Eddie's foot hit the porch. She never noticed

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Lady the go-rilla right at first, but when she did she like to boogered on us. Her face turned gray as ashes and she clum up Eddie like a coon goin' up a swamp-oak.

"Son, for the love of heaven!" she kind of grasped. "You know yore friends is always welcome here! But they's a limit to all things—and this here is it!"

Eddie laughed and kind of gentled her down, and after a minute or two he got her down from around his neck and set her back on the porch. After we told her what we was figuring on, she got plumb enthused.

"If that there varmint can break my Lud from sucking the jug," she said, "I swear I'll be grateful to it to my dyin' day! But go-rilla or no go-rilla, it's sho got a job cut out for itself. I been trying for twenty-odd years, off and on, and I ain't had no luck yet!" She took another look at Lady and she had the grace to grin a little. "But then," she said, "I got to admit I never had the natural advantages of no go-rilla!"

So she taken the lamp off the table and we all tiptoed into the back room. And there was Uncle Lud, all right, spraddled out in his old rocker, dog drunk and snoring like a hog in a waller.

"All right, Mister," Eddie told the Fair Man. "You got yore money and it's yore deal from here on out. Git at it!"

I mean that Fair Man, he done a real job, to! He unsnapped the chain from off Lady's neck and he stood her over right in front of Uncle Lud, kind of gittin' her in position there, up on her hind legs and all dyked out in them bally-dancer clothes of hers. And then he leaned over and give Uncle Lud a right sharp poke in the belly and jumped back of the door.

Poor Uncle Lud. He coughed and drawed in his breath and set right straight up in his chair. He opened his eyes and they walled up white in the lamplight worse'n a lightning-struck heifer's. You couldn't blame him, neither. There was that old go-rilla staring him in the face, kind of slobbering and yammerin' at him, and reaching out them big hairy paws like she was going to make him git up and dance around with her.

Lordymighty! Uncle Lud he like to have had a fit! He come up out of that old rocker in a second, roarin' and hollerin', and first off he run right smack into the chest of drawers in the corner. The mirror busted and fell all around his head and shoulders in a thousand pieces of glass, but he never even noticed it. He bounced backward and fetched up against the far wall, kind of scrabblin' at it like he was trying to run up it.

Then all of a sudden he whirled around and headed for the window, and before anybody could grab at him, he dived right out through glass frame and all—headfirst, sailing out there in the dark all spread out like a flying squirrel comin' out of a hackberry tree. We run to the window, but Uncle Lud must of lit running. For all we could see was a white flash cutting through the dark like a antelope in a dust cloud!

"Head him off, Bub—head him off!" Eddie hollered. "I didn't have no idea he was that fast on his feet! He'll run plumb out of this county if we don't ketch him quick!"

I mean he likely would of, too. Only he got his directions mixed up, and about the time we all piled out the front door we heard one devil of a splash from down towards the end of the back lot, and then some thumping around. And then we heard Uncle Lud yelling for help, his voice real faint and kind of hollow, like he was a mile away and a hundred yards straight down.

"Now thank Providence he has fell in the old well!" Aunt Lettysue said. "He's safe enough in there—there ain't more'n four foot of water in it. Eddie, you and Bub go pull him up!"

"In a minute, Ma," Eddie told her.

HE turned around to see if the Fair Man was there, and sho 'nough he was right in behind us, holding on to one end of Lady's chain and tryin' to sweet-talk her into calming down a little.

Poor thing—all that excitement had like to of scared her to death. She was trembling and jumping up and down and trying to get loose from her chain, and kind of jawin' at the Fair Man like she was giving him the dickens for gittin' her mixed up with such a bunch of folks. Eddie he felt real sorry for her.

"I hadn't no idea Pappy would upset yore go-rilla thataway," he told the Fair Man. "But maybe this here will make up for yore trouble!"

He handed the Fair Man a extra fifty and the Fair Man said he was right

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down obliged. And then him and Lady taken off down the hill like they was glad to git shut of us. And me and Eddie and Aunt Lettysue we run back inside and taken the lamp and went down the path to the well to pull Uncle Lud out.

He was a right sad sight to see, too—once we got him drawed up. They was mud and green scum all over him and the seat was tore out of his britches where he'd got hooked on the bucket-handle on his way down. He was shiverin' and shakin', and his mustash ends was drippin' water down his vest front. But what I mean, he was one more sober man!

"Boys," he asked, kind of low-toned, like he wasn't rightly sure if he was still alive or not, "boys, what in the living day was that there thing in my room?"

You got to hand it to my Aunt Lettysue. She seen her chance and she sho made the most of it. She nudged me and Eddie to keep still and she laid into Uncle Lud hot and heavy.

"Lud," she told him, "you've done called me one name too many in fronten my boy! I'm yore lawful wedded wife, and I got a right to walk in the same room as you ary time I take a notion to! Don't you go low-ratin' me like that in front of Eddie here!"

I swear it was funny to see Uncle Lud's face. The water was still drippin' off it and his jaw was swinging like a one-hinge barn door in a blue norther. He kind of swallowed once or twice before he got out so much as a squeak.

"You mean," he asked her, "you mean to tell me they wasn't nobody but you standin' in that there room, Lettysue?"

"Not a single ary other human being," she told him, which was true enough seeing the fair man was plumb back of the door. "And I ain't takin' it none too kindly for you to go running me down, neither. Bad enough for you to jump plumb out the window just because you don't like the looks of yore own wife! But I ain't goin' to stand no more humiliatin' in front of my growed-up boy!"

Uncle Lud he never said one more word! He kept looking from the one to the other of us and shaking his head like he couldn't quite take it all in. Me and Eddie was both dyin' to let go and have us a good laugh. But we figured a treatment worth a hundred and fifty cash dollars was right smart of a treatment, and we didn't want to do nothin' to spoil it.

So we taken Uncle Lud on back up to the house and dried him off and set him down by the fireplace in the big chair. And Eddie he went in the back room and come out with Uncle Lud's jug of East Texas white-lightning. He give me a wink and crossed over to where Uncle Lud was settin'.

"Here, Pappy," he told him, handing him the jug. "They's a little bit left, and you might as well finish it off. You know I'm set against yore drinkin', but seein' you been so cold and wet, it'll likely do you good!"

Uncle Lud, he still hadn't said ary other thing. But he taken the jug and just set there with it a minute, looking down at it.

Then all of a sudden he up and flang it right into the fireplace and busted it into ten million pieces.

"Son," he told Eddie, "when a man finds his main pleasures has got to crowdin' one another, it's time for him to make his choice. And I be dog if I ain't made mine. You can git the pledge card ary time you take a notion!"

And I mean, he wasn't lying neither. You wouldn't believe it—the way that man hates the sight of drinking whisky now! They ain't a power on earth could force ary drop down his gullet. I tell you, if they only was enough of them go-rillas in through here, they wouldn't be no market for white-lightning in the whole state of Texas!

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

HOCUS POCUS, AND NO MISTAKE

A Boo Boo Bounce Story by BEN FRANK

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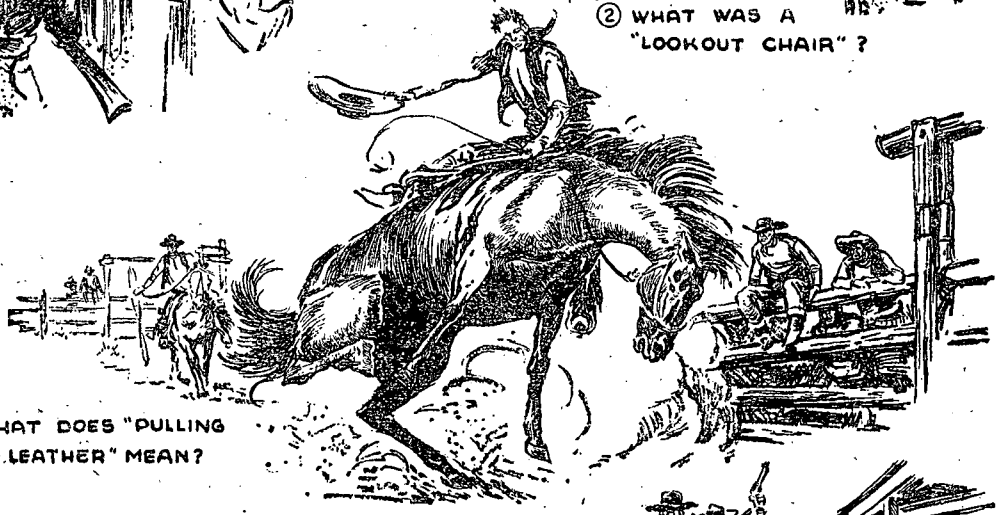
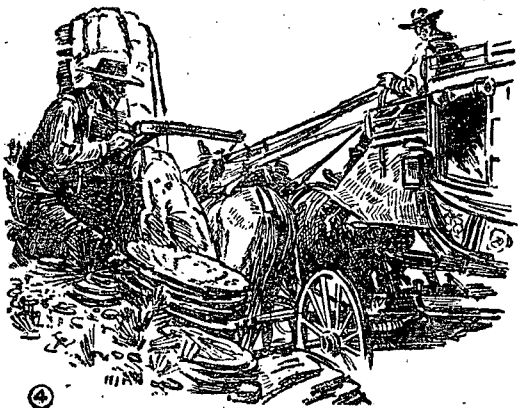
COW-COUNTRY QUIZ

① WHAT WAS A POTLASH ?

② WHAT WAS A "LOOKOUT CHAIR" ?



③ WHAT DOES "PULLING LEATHER" MEAN?



④ WHERE IS THE MOST FAMOUS "BOOT HILL" OF THE WEST ?

⑤ WHAT STARTED THE FAMOUS "LINCOLN COUNTY WAR ?

The answers are on Page 154—if you MUST look!

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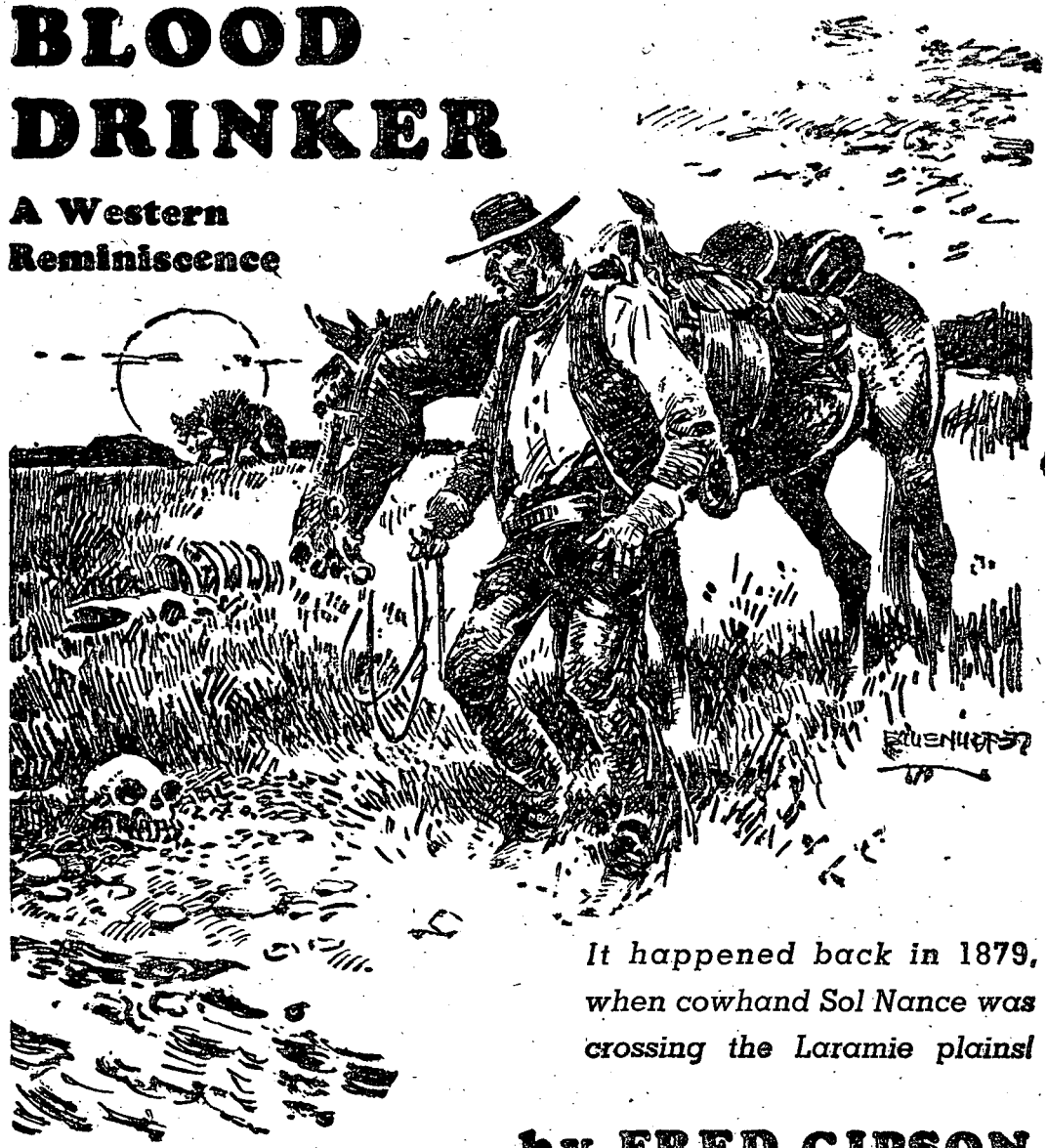
BLOOD DRINKER

A Western Reminiscence



It happened back in 1879, when cowhand Sol Nance was crossing the Laramie plains!

by FRED GIPSON

WHEN old Sol Nance was alive, some folks used to claim that he was the biggest liar in West Texas. And they may have been right. But there was one thing you could always say for Sol's yarns—whether lies or the absolute truth, they sure made good listening.

My favorite of Sol's yarns was about the time he scorned a bait of roast dog, only to wind up drinking wolf blood and being happy to get it.

According to Sol, this happening took place back in June of 1879. Sol had followed the North Star from the Rio Grande to South Dakota, trailing four thousand head of big Texas longhorn steers belonging to D. R. Fant. These were Indian contracted cattle, government bought, to help fill out the belly wrinkles of better than ten thousand Indians corralled on the Red Cloud Agency. Tom Moore was trail boss.

After the steers had been weighed out and turned over to the Indians, the

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agent told the trail crew to pitch camp close by and stick around. He said it was some sort of Indian holiday and the redskins were fixing to pull off a show the trail crew might find worth watching.

Which was no lie. Sol didn't see the fat dog butchered and skinned but he found the hide pegged out on the ground for drying. And come sundown, a passel of young Indian bucks came busting through the crowd that had gathered, riding fast ponies and yipping and waving their lances. Their naked hides were streaked with war paint, and they sure looked fierce.

This was the beginning of the show. In a couple of minutes, out came a big buck packing a table upside-down on top of his head. He set it down in the middle of the crowd. Here came a second buck with a couple of big butcher knives. The third Indian was packing the dog.

It was a big dog, fattened for the kill. He'd been roasted and browned to a turn. He looked fit to eat, if a man was in a dog-eating frame of mind.

But Sol Nance wasn't. Sol was squatting on his spurs, back a piece from the big doings, and shuddering at the idea.

"Yuh mean," he asked the agent, "that them rascals aim to eat dog?"

"Eat it!" said the agent. "You can lay big money on that, cowboy. They wouldn't swap a bite of that dog for a ten-pound chunk of beefsteak."

Sol felt his stomach turn over inside him. Sol had always been a lover of "man's best friend," and to his line of reasoning, eating dog amounted to about the same as eating your blood kin.

"Them dog-eating varmints," he growled. "Every one of 'em ought to be shot square between the eyes!" Sol was sure disgusted.

About a minute later, he was bowed up and fixing to shoot the first Indian.

Heap Fat Dog

All the big-feathered chiefs had stood up beside the roast dog lying on the table and spieled off a long-winded powwow that could have been heard to the South Platte. Now the buck with the butcher knives had gone to carving. The chiefs got the first and biggest chunks of dog meat, and one old boy picked up two. He headed straight for the trail crew with it. He spread a red-gummed grin of friendship and offered Sol a choice piece of roasted dog shank. He aimed to make the cowhands feel welcome.

"Heap good," he said to Sol. "Heap fat dog!"

But Sol, he couldn't see it that way. He came to his feet with his horns drooped. He was proddy as a wormy steer in fly time. He dragged his six-shooter and had the hammer drawn back to full cock when Tom Moore and the agent piled on him, calling for help.

It took three more quick-thinking and heavy-fisted cowhands to make Sol pull in his horns. And how the agent ever explained it to the insulted Indians, Sol never did learn. But he recollected that the agent was sure talking loud and fast.

Sol later admitted that tackling ten thousand Indians single-handed wasn't a smart move for a man who set any value on his head hair; but Sol was young in those days, high-handed and bronc headed. If them dog-eating heathen wanted to make a fight of it, Papa Nance's boy, Sol, was the bird to take them on! Sol was mad; he just didn't give a hoot!

The trail crew dragged Sol off out of danger; the agent lied them out of bad trouble, and big doings went right on. The Indians picked that dog's bones as clean as the ivory handle of Sol's six-shooter, then laid the bones on the ground and started themselves a dance that had the ground shaking before midnight.

But Sol missed most of the show. He was back at the bed wagon, bowed up and mad as a thicket sow with pigs. But the boys set to guard him kept his six-shooter out of reach, so all he could do was walk circles in the dark and snort and faunch.

Came daylight, and the trail crew quit the reservation, backtrailing toward Ogallala. That suited Sol. The quicker he could get out of a country where they ate dogs, the better satisfied he'd be. Also, Sol had a girl down in Texas who might still be waiting for him.

A seven-day ride put them back at the Niobrara River. Here, they pitched camp at the Dillon ranch where Sol struck up an acquaintance with a foreign-looking squawman by the name of Fourche. Fourche told Sol that if he was in a hurry to make it back to Texas, why didn't he take a short cut across

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the Laramie Plains to Ogallala? He knew a route, the squawman claimed, that'd save a rider close to two hundred miles. The water holes were far apart, but he could tell a man so he couldn't miss them.

Sol was game to make the try. The squawman squatted on the ground. He drew a map in the sand and pointed out the landmarks. Sol studied it a little, asked a couple of questions, then wiped out the map with his open hand. He had it. He headed for the wagon to draw his time.

Tom Moore told Sol that he was a fool. "Why, man, you can't make that ride," Tom told him. "You'll miss them waterholes and starve to death!"

Short Cut to Texas

But nobody was telling Sol Nance nothing in them days. He had mighty few wrinkles on his horns, but he had plenty of don't-give-a-damn in his make-up. He figured he was plenty wide across his pants to do his own snake-killing.

"You just pay me off," he told Tom Moore. "I'll git through. I'll be round-siding in the shade of a Texas mesquite before you ducks make it to Agallala!"

Tom Moore snorted and r'ared awhile longer, then paid Sol off.

It was a long haul to the first water hole. Seventy mile, the squawman had told Sol. But Sol lit out before sunup the next morning with his hat pulled at a hell-bent angle across his head. He was riding the best horse that ever swam the Platte; he'd camp on the first lake by sundown.

But there was a slip-up somewhere. The lake had dried up; the squawman had lied; or Sol had missed his course somewhere. He figured that ridge-running Red Bird horse he was riding had stacked seventy-five miles of Montana plain behind him by sunset. Maybe more. But if there was any water in sight, Sol couldn't locate it. And while old Red Bird was still clipping it off at a good pace, he was travelling with his head down now. And he sure didn't show any signs of scenting water.

Came night, and Sol knew he'd overplayed his hand. He pitched camp by the light of a rising moon. He'd brought along a little jerked beef in a muslin sack and tried to gnaw on that. But it was no good. Salt a wad of dry grass, and it'd taste the same. Sol was getting thirsty.

Sol picketed his horse and then made his bed down across the picket rope. That way, his horse couldn't pull the stake without waking him. There was a gall-bitter taste in Sol's mouth and old Red Bird was sure jaded. But Sol wasn't worried. Not yet. He'd find that fresh water lake come morning. Or, if he didn't, it wasn't but forty miles to the next water-hole. He could easily reach that next water hole before the sun set on him again.

Sol dropped off to sleep, but he didn't rest good. He kept dreaming about a cold-water spring he was just about to get a drink out of. He was just bellying down for a taste of that water when Red Bird snorted, loud and keen. Sol sat up in his blankets, dry as ever, grabbing for his Winchester.

It was a herd of antelope. The animals had got wind of Sol and his horse out there on the prairie and they'd come up to look the outfit over. What they saw didn't please them, either. They were circling Sol's dry camp, snorting and whistling, stomping their forefeet against the ground.

Sol was so mad about this bunch of fool antelope waking him just as he was about to get his dream drink of water that he cut loose at one with his Winchester. The blaze of fire and unexpected shot spooked old Red Bird. He fell back against the picket rope, fighting it with both forefeet. But the stake rope held, and Sol finally talked old Red Bird out of his scare.

Sol Spots a Wolf

But there was no more rest for Sol that night. Every time he dropped off to sleep, he started dreaming about that spring of water. And every time he was just about to get him a drink, them fool antelope came back to circle his camp and booger his horse.

Along about two o'clock in the morning, Sol gave it up and rolled his pack. He and Red Bird had knocked off thirty miles more by daylight.

But they hadn't found water. If that fresh-water lake was anywhere in the country, they'd passed it in the dark and Red Bird hadn't scented it.

It was after sunup when Sol spotted the wolf. He was a big old gray loafer

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wolf and he was travelling off to the left a couple of hundred yards. He seemed to be going Sol's route. Sol watched him close. It looked like the varmint was going Sol's gait and had Sol and his horse spotted.

That made the hair crawl on the back of Sol's neck. He dragged his Winchester out of the scabbard and opened up on the big loafer. He missed him a couple of yards and made another try, with the same results. Sol couldn't understand it. He'd been a good rifle shot up to now. Why couldn't he plug this wolf?

Sol finally figured it out when he got to noticing a little later how the ground was beginning to heave and move around him. The heat and his thirst were going to his head. Sol wasn't seeing true any more.

That rattled Sol for a minute. He swung up his rifle and emptied the magazine. And he didn't even make the old wolf break his gait.

For the next ten minutes, it took all the sand Sol had in his craw to keep from hooking spurs to Red Bird and trying to outrun that wolf. But Sol managed to hobble his scare. He knew he had to. He realized he'd got himself caught in a split stick and that this was a game for keeps. Let him lose his head here and he was a gone gosling. That wolf would have him eaten up before night fell.

Sol scabbarded his Winchester, tried to forget the wolf, and started scanning the landscape for signs of water.

By noon, Sol knew he was whipped. He'd missed that first water hole. By now he'd traveled far enough to have the second one in sight, but it wasn't there. He could look five miles in any direction, and all he could see was dry plain with the sun devils dancing across it. That, and one old loafer wolf padding along with his tongue lolled out of one side of his mouth. Sol got another great urge to make a try for that wolf, but he fought it down. He knew there wasn't any use.

Sol nooned in the shade of his horse, but he didn't try to eat. He couldn't. His tongue had begun to swell and he knew he'd never be able to crowd that dry jerky past it. He wouldn't have stopped at all, but he had to rest his horse. That Red Bird had plenty of bottom, but the way this starvation trip had gaunted him, it looked to Sol like somebody had reached up inside his horse and dragged everything out. If they didn't make it to water before long, there wouldn't be enough of that horse left to throw a shadow for a man to sit in.

The loafer wolf had pulled off a piece and laid down for a rest, too.

Sol got to thinking about the squawman then. He thought: "If I had that whickerbill here now, I'd slit his ears and run the lying thing's big feet through the slits."

Sol and Red Bird made it to water a little after sunset—but they didn't get a drink. It was an alkali lake and salt-rimmed.

Sol didn't notice this at first. He sighted the lake half a mile off and would have hollered for joy, only his tongue was swelled too big in his mouth to get a holler past it. Red Bird was dragging out his tracks with each step, and Sol piled out of the saddle, aiming to run ahead of him. But all he did was fall on his face and get sand into his sun-cracked lips. When he staggered to his feet again, he saw the wolf closing in. So he dragged a six-shooter, cocked it, and stayed with his horse.

The End of a Lobo

He didn't get to the water's edge before he knew it wouldn't do to drink. There was plenty of sign to warn him. The sun-bleached ribs of a horse rose up out of the prairie grass, and off to one side sat a human skull. The skull was bleached white and the teeth were parted in a grisly grin. It looked to Sol like the head of the dead man was laughing at him for being fool enough to think he could get a drink of water here.

What blood hadn't dried up inside Sol turned to ice water when he saw that skull grinning at him. He stood there a long time, staring at the thing, and shivering like a dog in the wet.

The sign was easy enough to read—when Sol could keep his rambling mind on reading it. Some poor devil had tried to cross these plains in times past. Him and his horse had hit the lake, starved for water. They'd loaded their bellies with the alkali stuff, and here was the result.

Sol finally lifted his eyes from the skull. Out yonder, less than a hundred yards away sat the wolf. Just sitting on

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his haunches and watching and waiting. Grinning a little, too, it seemed to Sol.

Back of the wolf the moon was rising.

First thing Sol knew, the lake and the moon and the big loafer wolf had all started a little game of ring-round-the-rosie, circling Sol and his horse. The next minute, the ground slanted up and slapped Sol in the face. Sol could tell that his lights were going out, but he wasn't able to do anything to stop it.

How long he lay there, Sol never knew. But to the best of his calculations, it was about time for the third night-herd shift to ride out, when he came to. Red Bird was standing over him, snorting and stomping his forefeet. And about ten steps away stood the loafer wolf. He had his muzzle lifted to the moon and was calling in his brothers. He was telling them that here lay fresh meat and easy-pickings, to come and get it.

Sol's head had cleared some now. He could think straighter, He made no fast moves, but he lifted his six-shooter from the dirt where he'd dropped it. He lined up the sights against the moon and brought the gun down to cover the wolf. When he pulled off, he emptied every shell in the cylinder before he stopped shooting.

But his aim was good. He'd got him a wolf. The big devil was down a-wallowing, squalling his head off and biting his wounds.

Sol dropped his empty six-shooter. He headed for the wolf at a staggering run, dragging out his jack-knife and biting the blade open. He piled onto the big varmint, choking him down with one hand and ripping his belly open with the other. The next minute, he'd turned loose his throat-hold and dropped his knife. He'd lost whatever squeamishness he'd had. He was on his knees beside the wolf, scooping up handsful of fresh blood and drinking it down like branch water.

The blood was hot and tasted like nothing Sol had ever swallowed before. But it was wet, and Sol's stomach held it. And it put enough life back into him for him to catch up his horse and ride on.

Came daybreak and Sol and old Red Bird were watering at a seep spring in the shade of some cottonwoods. The water was cool and sweet, and Sol and his horse both drank enough to kill them. But somehow, it didn't.

When Sol could hold no more water, he stripped his gear off Red Bird, staked him to graze, and fell over in the tree shade and slept till sundown.

When he woke up, he took on another batch of water and suddenly he had an appetite that was dangerous. Wouldn't he love to have a second try at that shank of roast dog now?

All the grub he had was what was left of the jerky tied up in the muslin bag, but hungry as Sol was, it tasted like a Christmas dinner. He wolfed it down, taking a cowhand's oath that one of these days he would ride back up in that country to shake hands with a dog-eating Indian and gut-shoot him a squawman by the name of Fourche.

But this Texas girl he was hurrying to see, she had other plans for Sol, and he never did make it back.

Cowhands and Cavalrymen

BACK in the 70's and 80's it wasn't uncommon for a cavalryman stationed in the West to dream of someday becoming a cowhand, perhaps even a rancher if Lady Fortune would smile. By the same token most of the young Westerners and a few older ones of that day dreamed of becoming cavalrymen, specifically members of the famous 7th. A few of each realized their dream.

During the recent war the famous 7th was mechanized and close to half her personnel consisted of Westerners. They spearheaded some of the most important fighting in the Pacific. Lt. Frank Henshaw of Texas was the first man to land on any of the Admiralty islands when American forces attacked the Japanese stronghold there on Los Negros. Close behind Henshaw came Lt. Dick Ryan, noted rodeo stunt man with a platoon of former bronco busters.

Mark Knight

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A Book Bargain ROUNDUP

by TEX MUMFORD

FOR summer reading, nothing beats a good western. And now that summer's here, with its lazy days, its long blue twilights and peaceful evenings, there's many a man who'll be reminded of nights around the campfire with the stamp of the horses out in the dark and the shrill song of insects like a chorus. Magic days—the same magic which a talented writer so often manages to capture between the covers of a book. Here are four new ones we've roped out for you, each by an author with that magic in his fingertips. At two-bits a throw this list, selected from the current 25c reprint crop, is rock-bottom fare back to the fabulous land of the West where men were men!

GENTLE ANNIE by MacKinley Kantor

She was not only gentle, she was beautiful, and she was loved by three tough and turbulent men in the lusty and brawling frontier town of Pahoka City, Oklahoma. Her name was Annie Lingan. Broke and stranded, she was befriended by the Goss brothers, Cotton and Violet. They also took in a wandering hobo named Rich Williams, after the hobo saved Violet Goss' life. What they didn't know was that Williams was really a U.S. Marshal looking for some train robbers. And what Williams didn't know was that the Goss brothers were the train robbers he was looking for!

By the time Williams found out he was fast friends with the men he had vowed to bring in, and found himself on their side in a fight. Between this and the influence of the woman they all loved, the situation was dynamite in Pahoka City.

Action flares like lightning in this tense novel. But there is more than sheer action. This is a fine piece of writing by one of America's master story-tellers.

WHISPERING RANGE by Ernest Haycox

Dave Denver, owner of the D Slash, was the only rancher of Sundown who refused to join the Vigilantes and go to war against Lou Redmain and his wild bunch.

"There's rustling on our ranges," Denver admitted. "But there's no proof against Redmain. And I don't string up men without proof."

He might have added that he hated violence in general, but the tough ranchers of Sundown wouldn't have understood.

But things changed when Denver's best friend was shot down in an outlaw trap. Then Denver led the D Slash to war—a war that flamed through the Yellow Hills and ended in the streets of Sundown where Denver's flaming Colts stood in the way of Redmain's fierce assault to loot and burn the town! You won't be able to put this down until it's finished.

HOPALONG CASSIDY'S PROTEGE by Clarence E. Mulford

This is the tale of Mesquite Jenkins, who has become almost as famous as his teacher, the immortal Hopalong Cassidy. Jenkins was a tough nut, a bow-legged, hard-riding, irreverent scamp with no respect for anything on earth except Hopalong Cassidy. He also had a large contempt for the law. He was, by all proper standards, no good.

But Hoppy alone thought there was good stuff in the boy. So when back-shooting rustlers dropped Cassidy with a .45 in the back, it was Mesquite Jenkins he asked to go out and bring them in. And Mesquite pulled a surprise. He got a deputy sheriff's star from Buck Peters, sheriff of Twin River County and it was as a lawman that he rode out on the vengeance trail!

A "must" for western readers.

BARB WIRE by Walt Coburn

Bringing in nesters to land claimed by cattlemen seemed like the surest invitation to bloody range war. Yet this is just what Creighton Marley did, with barb wire to present pointed argument to the land claims.

Before the ranchers could organize, murder struck swift and violent blows. A 7UP puncher was killed and a sheep camp attacked, with many of the woollies slaughtered. Cowmen and sheepmen blamed each other and the tension grew to fighting pitch before Buck Rawlins of the 7UP and an outlaw named The Nighthawk, joined forces to smash a deadly plot that threatened the range.

There is swift and deadly action in this novel of cow country life which only a man like Coburn, who has been a cowboy, could write.

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to the brave

The Kid left his saddle in a sweeping dive

by CHARLES ALAN GREGORY

THERE was trouble between the Kid and Mat Pearson from the day the Kid was hired.

In every outfit there's a bully-boy who makes more noise than the others and some he cows and some he leads and others step around him just to keep the peace. At the BB Ranch, Mat Pearson was the loud-crowing rooster. A big man he was, abusive, quarrelsome like most bullies, and said to be lightning fast with a gun. Nobody liked him, but most of the hands were afraid of him. At least they didn't want to test his gun speed. So Mat Pearson was the big chief skookum around the bunkhouse.

And of course the Kid was bound to run afoul of him. It began the day the Kid was hired. He brought his gathering into the bunkhouse and stood there, looking around. Abe Douglas, the foreman, looked in over his shoulder and gave what passed for an introduction.

"Boys, make you 'quainted with the Kid. Show him where to dump his stuff."

He went away. Somebody waved an arm at a row of bunks and told the Kid to pick out any that wasn't being used. The Kid put his bedroll on one and at that Mat Pearson heaved up to his six feet two and swaggered over.

"Not that one, Kid," he rumbled.

The Kid looked up. He wasn't much shorter, but considerably leaner than Pearson.

"Yours?" he asked.

"Nope. But it's right next to mine. And I don't let nobody sleep next to me that close. I'm delicate and th' snoring keeps me awake."

With which Pearson spread his legs, hooked his thumbs in his gunbelt and glowered down, waiting for the Kid's next move.

The Kid wasn't wearing a gun, everybody saw that. But he didn't seem inclined to any hostile notions. He frowned a little and shook his head.

"Don't rightly know if I snore," he said. "Never laid awake to listen. But one bunk's the same as another to me. I'll take this one over here."

There was a little amused sneer on Pearson's face as he turned away. And maybe a little disappointment too. It had been almost too easy, putting this new hand in his place.

GRUB pile was sounded and the hands streamed into the cook shack. Everybody was jabbering and

The new hand meets the bully of the BB Outfit!

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nobody noticed the Kid, who glanced around and then sat down in a vacant place.

A big hand fell on his shoulder. He glanced up to meet Pearson's eyes.

"My place," the big man growled. "And I'm mighty perticular about such things. Better get it straight pronto, Kid. It'll avoid trouble."

The Kid flushed, got up and took another seat. All the hands kept their eyes on their plates. It was embarrassing.

It wasn't that they expected — or wanted to see the Kid tangle with Pearson. It was just that he showed no spunk at all. He didn't even protest or ask for an explanation. He didn't even say, "How was I supposed to know it's your seat? Why don't you carve your name on it if it's so important to you?" There just didn't seem to be any spirit in him.

Even Pearson was outraged. Every-time something like this happened—not only to Pearson, but to the other hands as well—the Kid was polite and apologized for being in the way.

There was the morning the hands piled out at dawn and went tearing down to the corral to rope out their mounts and get started on spring round-up. The Kid and Pearson didn't even see each other in the half light and the rush of the spooky broncs.

Both their loops sailed out and both settled over the neck of the same claybank gelding.

"Turn him loose!" Pearson bellowed. "Get your doggoned twine off of that cayuse's neck! He's mine!"

Now the Kid's rope had actually settled over the claybank's neck first as could easily be seen, for Pearson's loop was above his. And the Kid couldn't even get his rope off unless Pearson took his off first. But he shrugged his shoulders.

"I roped him first," he said, "but if you want him that bad you can have him. Take your rope off so I can turn him loose."

Pearson took his rope off and the Kid flipped his loose and of course the claybank was free and got away, so Pearson had to catch him all over again. He did a prodigious amount of swearing and blamed the Kid loudly for the whole thing.

Somehow the Kid's meekness made Pearson worse. The more the Kid gave in and stepped aside and refused to quarrel, the more Pearson hated him and the more mean things he thought up to pull on him. It seemed as if the big man was engaged in a contest with himself to see if he couldn't goad the Kid into some kind of an outbreak.

"Why don't you wear a gun?" he would demand sometimes. "A real man ain't dressed without one!"

The Kid didn't answer him, but the foreman, Abe Douglas, cut in.

"If that's the only way you can tell a man, Mat," he said, "some folks I know is shore travelin' in disguise."

It went that way from bad to worse, with Pearson snarling and snapping at the Kid, trying to edge him into some kind of fight. And life getting more and more uncomfortable for the Kid all the time.

Perhaps he himself didn't realize how far it had gone, however, until he happened to overhear a bit of conversation between the foreman, Douglas, and Old Man Barber, the ranch owner.

"—but Pearson's a trouble-maker," Douglas was saying.

"All the same," rumbled Barber, "I can't stand a lily-livered gent nowhow, Abe. Gives the place a bad name. Get rid of him. Shucks, get rid of them both!"

"That's the funny thing," Douglas said. "They're your two best men. Ain't two better men on this range with cattle. Fire 'em both and you'd darn near cripple this outfit."

"Then fire one of them. Figger it out for yourself! But I don't want everybody laughin' at us an' calling the BB Old Lady Barber's School for Girls!"

The Old Man's voice rose to a yell on that, and perhaps for the first time the Kid realized how things were. He was sunk in thought all the rest of the evening, and when the Sunday evening poker game was started, he was drawn in and playing before he knew it.

BUT his luck was running that night and a little pile of quarters and dimes and dollar bills began to mount in front of him. While across the table, Pearson rumbled and stewed and fretted and swore as his hoard trickled across table to the Kid's side.

"That kind of luck ain't natural," Pearson muttered as the Kid absent-

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mindedly turned face up his second straight flush to take in the pot.

The Kid never heard him, but the others around the table were getting tense and many an anxious eye was cocked to the gunbelts hanging on the wall.

Three more rounds were played and the Kid came through again with four aces.

Pearson leaped to his feet with a roar, scattering cards and money.

"There's something crooked goin' on here!" he bellowed. "Four aces!"

"Sit down, Pearson!" Douglas snapped. "You're a rotten bad loser. Did you see any cheating?"

"I don't have to see it!" Pearson howled. "Did you or anyone else ever see a man git such a run of cards honest? I say this mealy-mouthed Kid is a danged cheatin' card-sharp and I'm callin' him right now!"

He leaned over the table, eyes glaring into the Kid's. Everybody froze. The Kid sat there, a little pale, fingering his cards, with something crawling back of his eyes as though he were figuring things out.

Pearson whirled and stalked to the wall. He took down his gunbelt and buckled it around him.

"I'll be outside," he announced in a cold, deadly voice. "Git yourself dressed like a man, Kid, and come out. I'll be waitin'."

There was silence when he had stamped out. And a tension thick enough to cut. Then Douglas broke it.

"Look, Kid," he said. "You don't have to go out."

"No," said the Kid. "I can run away. That's what it's come to now, hasn't it?" He rubbed his hand over his face. "Funny. I don't understand it. Why does he want to fight me? I never did anything to him. I tried to be nice to him."

His eyes met the foreman's. "I'm not afraid of him, Abe."

"You're not?" Douglas was flabbergasted. "Then why did yuh back down every time?"

"Back down? I wasn't backing down. Look. When I was a kid, my mother always pounded it into my head that I shouldn't be selfish; that I should consider other people. So when somebody else wants the same thing I want I figger that to insist I get it is being selfish. It ain't that important—I don't have to have it. And why am I any more entitled to it than anyone else? My mother always said a real gent will step aside for someone else. It's just decent."

"Brother," said Abe Douglas drawing a breath, "you sure picked the wrong hombre to be decent with. Don't you know, Kid, that when you act like that with a man like Pearson, he just thinks you're afraid of him? And it makes him worse—makes him pizen mean to you?"

"Yeah," said the Kid slowly. "I know now. But it took me all this time to figger it out. And it looks like I've got to change toward brother Pearson. But I don't want to kill him."

"He's sure as grab going to try to kill you!" Douglas said.

"I can handle him," the Kid said.

From outside came Pearson's bellow. "Kid, yuh got two minutes to walk out like a man, or saddle your horse and get gone! You hear me?"

"I hear you," the Kid muttered, though it was too low for Pearson to get the words.

He got up. He walked to the door. His roan horse came whinnying to the corral bars. A hundred feet away, Mat Pearson stood, spraddle-legged, waiting.

The Kid came out. He turned aside to the corral, led his horse out and saddled him. Douglas, who had followed him out, stood watching in puzzled disappointment. Pearson, from his distance watched with a contemptuous grin.

THE KID finished saddling and swung aboard. But he didn't turn his horse on the trail to town. He pointed him straight at Mat Pearson and lifted him into a gallop!

Pearson's grin changed to a hard scowl as the roan thundered down upon him. Almost too late, he yanked at his gun. The six-shooter came up just as the horse swerved to prevent running the man down. As the gun reached firing position, the Kid left his saddle in a sweeping dive. He brought Pearson down like a felled oak and together they crashed to the ground in a stunning fall.

They were up almost instantly. Pearson had lost his hat and gun and most

(Concluded on page 162)

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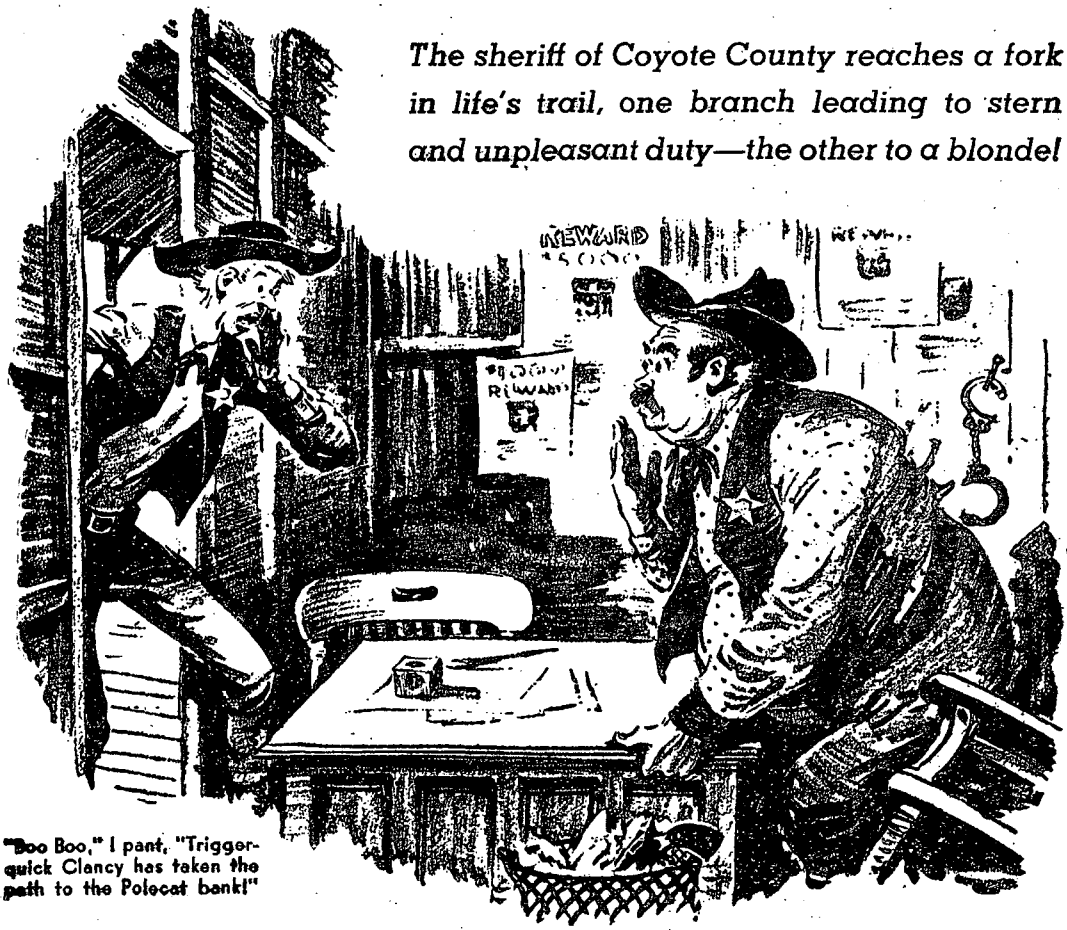
PHILOSOPHER, and no mistake

The sheriff of Coyote County reaches a fork in life's trail, one branch leading to stern and unpleasant duty—the other to a blonde!



"Boo Boo," I pant, "Trigger-quick Clancy has taken the path to the Polecat bank!"

a Boo Boo Bounce story by BEN FRANK

MY DEAR," I say to my wife at breakfast time, "this being the first of the month, my allowance of ten dollars spending money is due, and—"

"Hopewell," she say grim, "what is this I hear about you helping Lilly Lou Luscious push her grandpa in his wheel-chair?"

"My dear," I say with dignity, "being a gentleman of the old school and deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., I—"

"Tish-tush!" she snaps, getting to her feet no little irritated. "You are like all the other men in Polecat. Let a girl roll her big blue eyes at you and—"

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"Now, my dear," I soothe, "leave us be calm—"

"Calm!" she roars. "Calm when there is a home-breaker—'

"But," I murmur, "she is just a poor, innocent girl who—"

"Hopewell, how can you say that when she ain't in Polecat no longer than three days before she has wrapped the mayor and Judge Jackson around her little finger, and they have give her a job in the town library?"

"My dear, not to change the subject, but my allowance is—"

"Not one cent!" she says harsh. "And as long as Lilly Lou is in town, you are no longer going out anyplace at night!"

I SEE things are out of control and no mistake, so I reach for my hat.

"Hopewell," she says, "should I ever catch you walking along the street with that blond maverick, I will—"

I put on my hat and hurry outside, for I am one who loves peace and quiet. Also, I am utmostly worried over money matters, having borrowed $5 from Boo Boo Bounce.

Being sheriff, he is my boss and not one to overlook a debt come the first of the month at which time I have promised to pay him back.

When next I glance up, I see I am in front of Grandma Grinder's house, which is where at Lilly Lou and her grandpa have been rooming ever since she brought him here for his health. And what do I see but poor old Grandpa Luscious setting in his wheelchair with the sun on his long white beard and hair and a horse blanket wrapped about his useless legs.

"How are you feeling today?" I ask kindly.

"I am never one to complain," he says sad, "but am grateful to have a fine granddaughter like Lilly Lou to look after me. Poor child, tied down to a old man who cannot walk a step."

I go on and presently come to the Polecat library, and there I see Lilly Lou herself smiling out the window at me. With her shiny gold hair and big blue eyes, she is prettier than a ten-acre patch of Indian turnips in the springtime.

I tip my hat polite, but do not tarry, for across the street I observe Mabel Crump, who is a great tongue to gossip.

JUST as I reach the jail, I meet none other than old man Bundy, editor of the "Polecat News."

"Hello, Deputy," he sneers, for he stands on the other side of the political fence and has no love for me and Boo Boo. "Would you care to make any statement for my paper concerning who robbed Pop Pully two nights ago of six dollars and twelve cents?"

"Mr. Bundy," I say, looking him in the eye, "I can state only that the sheriff and I are working on the case."

"Working! Heh, heh!" he says and walks away, leaving me with a uneasy feeling.

I tip-toe into the jail office, for Boo Boo often takes a after-breakfast nap and does not like to be woke up of a sudden. But this morning I see he is setting in his easy chair wide-awake and staring at a big red book on his desk.

"Hopewell," he says, turning his fat red face to me, "I am glad yuh are here, but leave us find a chair and set very quiet whilst I finish reading this page."

I do so, wondering how long it will be before he remembers this is the day I am to pay him back the five smackeroos.

Presently he leans back in his chair and folds his hands across his oversized middle. I see his eyes have a far-away look in them and his three chins are quivering no little.

"Deputy," he says, "last evening, Lilly Lou Luscious brought me this book to read. May I add that Lilly Lou is a very tasty dish, and no mistake, and I have come to realize that being a bachelor such as I is a very lonely life indeed!"

This is when I see the love bug has bit Boo Boo muchly.

"Incidental," he goes on, "this book is called 'The Philosophy of Life'."

"What is it all about?" I inquire polite.

He gives his fat thumbs a energetic twiddle. "It is like this, Hopewell. You are what you are because you have chose to take a certain turn in the path of life.

"To explain in simple language: life is like walking down the street of Polecat. If you keep going straight ahead, you come to the post office. But should you turn left, you end up at the ceme-

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tery. In other words, as yuh journey along life's way, yuh keep coming to forks in the road and must choose one or t'other. It is these choices that make yuh what you are. Now, for example, take Trigger-quick Quincy and his unknown pal."

Boo Boo reaches into a desk drawer and comes up with a dodger which shows Trigger-quick's ugly mug, and says, "$1,000 REWARD."

"Someplace along life's way, Trigger-quick Quincy and his partner had to choose between a evil and a good path. They chose the evil path, and now—"

"And now," I add, "they give us goose-pimples."

Boo Boo shudders. "True, Hopewell, but leave us hope they never choose the path to the Polecat bank. Which reminds me, we have not found out who robbed Pop Pully of six dollars and twelve cents. And speaking of money, it is the first of the month, and you can now pay me the five ringers which yuh borrowed—"

There is a sudden commotion outside, a detraction for which I am no little grateful. The door whams open, letting in Mayor Mince-meat Malone. He is breathing hard, and his thin face has no more color in it than a clean bed sheet.

"Sheriff," he roars, "I've been robbed!"

Boo Boo's face turns pale. "Robbed?"

"Yes!" Mince-meat bellows. "One hundred dollars cash, which I had drew from the bank to pay for repairs on the footbridge over Skunk Creek. Boo Boo, I demand action and my money back, or I will tell old man Bundy to run a piece in his paper that will make yore hair stand on end—if yuh had any!"

Boo Boo's face grows a shade whiter. "Now, now, Mayor," he says soothe-ful, "leave us calmly set down and tell the details plainly so me and my deputy can get busy pronto."

"It is like this," Mince-meat says, not setting down. "I stuck this one hundred cash into my ole saddle bag wherein I keep my letters and important papers. Then I left my office and went to the barber shop to play off a tie checker game. After this, I returned to my office, got the saddle bag and took it home. From then on, the bag weren't out of my sight, so whoever stole the money did so whilst I was playing checkers. I didn't miss the money till this morning when—"

"Leave us back-track a moment," Boo Boo says businesslike. "At what time of day did yuh play checkers?"

"Between eight and nine last night. Yuh see—" The mayor's voice trails off, and his eyes bug very much indeed. "Boo Boo," he gurgles, "I have just recollected something. Now I know who done it."

"Good!" Boo Boo smiles, "Who?"

"Lilly Lou Luscious! And to think I helped get her a job in the library! She dropped into my office to bring me a book to read. She saw me put the money in the saddle bag. Nobody else in the wide world knowed where at I put that money!"

I GLANCED at Boo Boo. But he is smiling no little dapper.

"Mince-meat," he says, "never did nobody have a better alibi between eight and nine P.M. last evening than Lilly Lou. Shortly before eight, she brought me this book, 'The Philosophy of Life.' I might add that we spent several pleasant hours together, so it could not be her who stole your money."

Mince-meat looks somewhat relieved. "I would hate to think that a sweet, lovely girl like her—" He stops sudden, his face turning no little pink. "Boo Boo, yuh get busy and find my money!"

He puts on his hat and goes out very rapid.

Boo Boo sighs. "Trouble, trouble, Hopewell. First Pop Pully, and now the mayor. Leave us wander over to the mayor's office to investigate, although it will, no doubt, be a waste of our valuable time."

We go outside and come to where the path that cuts across the courthouse lawn divides. Boo Boo comes to a halt.

"Deputy," he says, "behold! Here I have a choice of going one of two ways. Should I turn right, I will reach the mayor's office. Should I turn left, I will eventually come to the library and Lilly Lou Luscious. Which shall it be?"

"Right," I say immediate. "Business before—"

"Left," he says. "Deputy, carry on."

With that, he waddles along the left-hand path without a backward glance.

In Mayor Mince-meat Malone's office, I find nothing to help solve the crime.

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Some little later, I head back toward the jail office, and what should I see but Boo Boo and Lilly Lou walking along very cozy, he pushing her grandpa in the wheelchair.

The moment I step into the jail office, I realize I have company. It is none other than Chicky-choo Crump, a nester from Skunk Creek Valley. Immediate, I open the windows wide, for there is nobody in the whole world who sneezes like Chicky-choo.

"Hopewell," he says, "who is that lovely, blue-eyed blonde I seen you making eyes at in the library window?"

"I was not making eyes," I reply icy. "Her name is Lilly Lou Luscious, but Boo Boo Bounce has a crush on her, and I advise you to stay away—"

"Phooey on Boo Boo!" Chicky-choo says. "He is—"

Sudden like, Chicky-choo's nose begins to quiver and his eyes water. I grab my chair and hold on tight, for I know he is about to sneeze. It comes like the explosion of a locomotive boiler, a "chicky-choo-ooo!" that makes Boo Boo's desk jump, and I know it is a good thing I opened the windows, or all the glass would have been blowed out by the concussion.

"As I was sayin'," Chicky-choo goes on, "Boo Boo is about as romantic as a dead whale and twice as dumb. Why, he ain't—"

There is a heavy step outside. The door swings open, and Boo Boo waddles in. His eyes are slightly glazed, and his fat face is somewhat the color of a dog's tongue.

"Hopewell," he sighs content, "the book is right. The happy life is merely the matter of choosing the right fork in the road. Now, if I had not took the path to the library—"

He sees Chicky-choo then and blinks no little surprised.

"What're you doing here?" he gurgles.

Chicky-choo says, "Just visiting," and walks out.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, setting down and closing his eyes, "you can have the rest of today off. Kindly depart, for I wish to be alone with numerous happy thoughts concerning a certain young lady with blue eyes."

"Boo Boo," I say utmostly worried, "leave us not forget there has been two robberies and—"

"On yore way, Deputy," Boo Boo says. "I have chose the path of happy dreams for today. Tomorrow is soon enough to worry about unpleasantries."

I put on my hat and depart. Outside, it is indeed a nice day to go fishing, which I do.

NOTHING happens at the creek except fish biting and I almost get mixed up with some hornets, which have built a nest in a old dead tree which has fell against another tree and is a very dangerous booby trap indeed, and then some. But when I am on my way home, who should I meet but old man Bundy, spoiling my day instantaneous.

Bundy points a ink-stained finger at my string of fish.

"Ah, ha, Hopewell!" he says. "I see you have been fishing on the taxpayers' money. Maybe I should ought to put in my paper what a good fisherman the deputy of Coyote County is when there are robbers to be caught."

"Mr. Bundy," I say quick, "I am carrying these fish around as a means of misleading the lawless. If you must know the truth, I am really out looking for clues."

"Hopewell," he cackles, "you should ought to be in Congress."

The next morning, which is very pleasant indeed, I set down to a breakfast of catfish and biscuits, which my wife is no little fond of and is smiling pleasant about.

"My dear," I say hopeful, "it is not good policy that the deputy sheriff of Coyote County, U.S.A., should not have one single cent in his pockets. Should you give me my—"

The smile leaves her face. "Hopewell, as long as that blond maverick is in Polecat, you will continue to have not one single cent in your pockets!"

I put on my hat and go to the jail.

When I step into the office, Boo Boo glances up from "The Philosophy of Life" and gives me a very toothy smile.

"Deputy," he says dreamy, "what turn will the path of my life take today? Will it be to the left, or right, or—"

As if in answer to his question, the door slams open, and old Judge Jackson comes in on his cane, swearing with no little fervor.

"Boo Boo," he raves, "I have been stole blind!"

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Boo Boo sinks back in his chair very faint. "What?"

"Robbed!" The judge raps his cane no little noisy on Boo Boo's desk. "Yuh know how I always keep my valuables in a tin box, which I hide where at is none of anybody's business. Last night, a certain party got into my house through a unlocked window and stole the box."

"But," Boo Boo says hoarse, "how could anybody find—"

The judge pounds the desk vicious. "We have been took in by a blonde hussy, Boo Boo. There can be no doubt about it, Lilly Lou Luscious stole my box!"

Boo Boo begins to shake his head feeble, but the judge stops him by pointing his cane direct at Boo Boo's red nose.

"I know yuh're sweet on the gal, Boo Boo, but that ain't here nor yon. The fact is, she's a thief, and I will prove it!

"Last evening, she brought me a book to read. I was putting some money in my tin box, and she saw where at I hid the box, me being trustful of such a sweet little— So I figure it was her, and nobody else, who unlatched a window behind my back and returned after I was asleep in bed and stole the box. I would not raise such a smell if there was not eighty-seven dollars and forty-nine cents in the box."

"I cannot believe," Boo Boo groans, "that Lilly Lou—"

"What you believe ain't here nor yon," the judge cuts in icy. "Do yore duty, sheriff, or—"

"I would not want to accuse Lilly Lou unjustly," Boo Boo says. Then his eyes fix on me. "Hopewell, it is up to you. Kindly trot over to Grandma Grinder's and see what yuh can learn about Lilly Lou last night. Use the utmost tact and diplomacy, for I would not care for her to think that I mistrust—"

"Should my wife learn that I went to Grandma Grinder's to see Lilly Lou," I say faint, "she would wring my—"

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says frigid, "there is many a Polecatter who would jump at a chance to be my deputy. Do yore duty, or—"

I put on my hat and go over to Grandma Grinder's house. Here I find Lilly Lou and her grandpa in the kitchen, him setting very happy in his wheelchair and she putting together numerous sandwiches.

"Hello, Hopewell," she says, smiling no little pretty at me. "Guess what. It is such a lovely day that I have took a short vacation from the library to take my dear grandpa on a picnic down by Skunk Creek."

Grandpa Luscious wheels his chair over to a table and picks up a big wicker basket with a lid on it.

"Do you think this will hold enough food for Lilly Lou and me?" he asks, chuckling through his white whiskers.

"Why," I say, "that should ought to hold enough food for you two and Boo Boo Bounce to boot."

Lilly laughs no little musical. "Hopewell," she says, "promise you won't tell dear Boo Boo we're going on a picnic. He would be sure to follow us, and Grandpa and I want to be alone today."

THEN she reaches up and pinches my cheek, and I feel numerous tingles running up and down my spine, which my wife would not like, and no mistake.

"You can trust me to keep a secret," I say. "Could you tell me where at I might find Grandma Grinder?"

"She is out feeding her chickens," Lilly Lou answers.

I go out to the chicken house and see Grandma Grinder, who is a dried up little old woman the size of a sawed-off fence post and twice as homely.

"Grandma," I say, "betwixt you, me and the gate post, would you mind telling me where Lilly Lou was last night?"

Grandma Grinder gives me a unfriendly stare. "It ain't none of your business, or Boo Boo's neither, where Lilly Lou was at last night. But I will tell you, anyway. Right after she had put her poor, helpless old grandpa to bed and tucked him in, she went to bed, too. But a noise at her window scared her, poor child; and she come to my room, shaking like a whipped puppy. She wanted to sleep in my room, and I let her."

"You mean she was in your room all night?"

"That's right, Hopewell, sleepin' like a baby on a pallet I fixed for her on the floor. And you can tell your nosy, fat sheriff he is a—"

"Grandma," I say, "Boo Boo will be utmostly delighted, and then some, to

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know this, for there is some suspicion that last night Lilly Lou stole Judge Jackson's tin box in which he keeps his money. Now that she has a alibi—"

"What?" Grandma Grinder says, picking up a stick of stovewood very suggestive. "Do you mean to tell me that you and Boo Boo suspect that dear, sweet Lilly Lou—"

I do not like the look in her eyes, so I tip my hat no little polite and depart.

I return to the jail office and find Boo Boo setting no little fidgety, while Judge Jackson is tapping his cane very clattery and glaring at Boo Boo's bald head.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, "leave us hear the worst."

I explain how it was that Lilly Lou spent the night in Grandma Grinder's room and was not out of it from bedtime till breakfast. Boo Boo's fat face begins to beam like the noon sun, and the judge stops tapping his cane.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo smiles, "you have did your duty well, and I am utmostly relieved. Now all is well, and—"

"All is not quite well," the judge says gritty. "My tin box is gone, Sheriff, and it is up to you to get it back. And,"—he gives Boo Boo no little poke in the stomach with his cane—"if we do not get action on these recent crimes, we citizens of Coyote County will begin to look for another sheriff!"

With that, he walks out.

Face pale, Boo Boo blinks rapid at me. "Hopewell," he says, "things is in a mess, and no mistake. Leave us consider."

"Such as?"

"The philosophy of life." He closes his eyes in deep thought. "Someplace along the way, I have made a wrong turn and, consequently, have ended up behind the eight ball."

He opens his eyes wide and stares hard at me.

"Hopewell, the wrong turn must have been when I hired you for my deputy! If I had a deputy who had as much brains as a hossfly, I would not likely be in this circumstance of not knowing what to do about all this money being stole. And speaking of money, Deputy, it occurs to me that you have not as of to date, paid me my five ringers. Kindly hand same over, pronto!"

"Boo Boo," I say desperate, "it is like this. I, too, have took the wrong turn—"

From outside, there comes a great clatter of a running horse, which stops with utmost abruptness in front of the jail. Boots pound across the board walk and up to the door, which is flung open with great force. An oldster with a fierce handle-bar mustache and a red face, who is none other than old man Beasley, owner of the Lazy-B ranch, leaps into the room and bangs a heavy fist on Boo Boo's desk.

"Sheriff," he yells, "what do we pay yuh for? To set around on the seat of yore shiny pants and grow fat? Not by a danged sight! We pay yuh to guard our property and keep owlhooters and what-not from stealin' us blind!"

Boo Boo, I see, is utterly astounded. So I say sootheful:

"Mr. Beasley, kindly calm yourself and tell us the whole story from beginning to end."

THE oldster drops down on a chair and draws a deep breath.

"Sorry, gents," he mumbles, "but when a man has two of his best saddle-hosses stole, he gets more or less het-up."

"What?" Boo Boo gulps. "Two hosses stole?"

"Yuh heard me," Beasley says grim. "Left my two best hosses shut up in the corral like as always so they'd be handy in the mornin'. Went out to saddle up, an' they was gone. The gate stood open, so figured at first they got out. Couldn't find hide nor hair, then we noticed that two saddles was missin' along with bridles. Well, what're yah goin' to do about it, Boo Boo? Just set there like a balloon lassoed to a stump?"

"Mr. Beasley," Boo Boo says faint, "leave us pause for a moment to give this a second thought."

"Leave us shut up and stop dilly-dallying around!" Beasley roars. "Boo Boo, I have come and reported hoss stealin'. Now, the rest is up to you. If you do not care to move that fat carcass around and about to look for my hosses, then I say it is time Coyote County got a new sheriff!"

"Mr. Beasley," Boo Boo says, getting to his feet very determined, "I, Boo Boo Rounce, always gets his man. Kindly do not no longer worry about yore hosses, but consider them the same as found."

"That is more like it," old Beasley says, looking slightly less grim. "How-

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some-ever," and a sudden scowl comes to his face, "if I don't get my hosses back, I am going to raise a smell that can be smelled to the state capital from here and then some!"

He stamps out with a great jingling of spurs, leaving me and Boo Boo utmostly shaken.

"Boo Boo," I ask weakly, "now what?"

Boo Boo sinks down upon his chair. "Hopewell, at the moment, I am at a loss, and no mistake." Then he glares at me. "What have I got you hired for, Deputy? To borrow five smackeroos, which you have not repaid? Or to be of some assistance to me in my time of trouble?"

I swallow audible and say nothing.

Boo Boo wags a fat finger very stern at me. "Hopewell, get busy and find out who is the criminal of Coyote County, or else I will locate a deputy who can."

"But, Boo Boo," I sputter, "leave us—"

"No buts," he says, "and kindly do not shut the door noisy on yore way out to get busy."

I stagger to my feet and reach for my hat. At that moment, the door opens gentle, and who should step in soundlessly but old man Bundy, editor of the "Polecat News."

He grins wicked and hisses, "So there has been another crime committed in our midst, Sheriff!"

No little startled, Boo Boo jerks around in his chair. "Mr. Bundy," he wheezes, "don't never come sneaking up on me thusly. I, who have a high-strung nervous system, cannot—"

"Relax," Bundy says. "I just come over to see if you have any news for my paper tomorrow."

Boo Boo shakes his head. "No, and good-by—"

"Not so fast," Bundy says, setting down and fishing out a cigar. "Leave us lock at the record, Boo Boo. Pop Pully held up. The mayor's office entered—one hundred dollars missing. Judge Jackson robbed. Now, two horses, saddles and bridles stolen from the Lazy-B."

"I," Boo Boo says dignified, "am working night and day to—"

"As far as I can see," Bundy grins sour, "you ain't done a thing. In fact, you haven't been out of your office, except to go eat and to walk around with this Lilly Lou Luscious heifer."

"Mr. Bundy," Boo Boo says, scowling fierce, "kindly do not refer to Miss Luscious as a heifer. Also, for yore information, I wish to state that I know precisely who has been doing all this stealing and I will lay my hands on said party when the right time arrives. And on second thought, I wish to add that this present crime wave is at an end for good and all!"

Taken back no little, Mr. Bundy blinks like a owl in sunlight. "You—you mean you have found out who is—"

"Exactly!" Boo Boo says. "Soon I will give yuh all the details to print in yore paper. Adios, and do not slam the door!"

Mr. Bundy staggers out like a man who has been hit over the head very hard.

"Boo Boo," I cry in deep admiration, "you are a genius! How did you find out who is at the bottom of all this stealing?"

BOO BOO shakes his head unhappy. "Hopewell, to tell the truth, what I said to Mr. Bundy was so much hot air to get rid of him. I have no more idea of who is guilty than a dead duck."

"Boo Boo," I say, feeling faint, "when Mr. Bundy finds this out and prints it in his paper tomorrow, come next election, you will get no more than two votes. Yours and mine."

"Hopewell," he says, "leave us be philosophical and cling to one last faint hope."

"Which is?"

"That we will come to a fork in the path of life and will choose the right turn. Otherwise—"

The door opens, and who should step in but Grandma Grinder with a envelope in her wrinkled hand.

"Boo Boo," she says distasteful, "I promised Grandpa Luscious I would deliver this to you when I come up town for groceries. Otherwise, I would not set foot in such a place as this."

She slaps the letter down on his desk and walks out with a swish of her black silk skirt.

Boo Boo picks up the letter and rips it open.

"Hopewell," he smiles, "somehow I have a feeling that this note from one of the world's finest gentlemen may be the fork in the path of my life. Leave us retain quiet whilst I read."

He unfolds the single page and reads.

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Suddenly the blood drains from his face, the page flutters to the floor, and he slumps down in a dead faint.

"Boo Boo," I cry in alarm, "what is the matter?"

He does not answer on account of he is out cold. I pick up the letter and read:

My dear Sheriff Bounce:

It has come to my notice how you have been making love to my sweet innocent little granddaughter. Therefore, I wish to point out that you have the choice of one of two paths. You can either marry my darling Lilly Lou and make her happy by giving her, me, her Uncle Louie and her Aunt Hattie and four children a home for the rest of their lives. Or you can give her $250 to ease the heartbreak she will feel should you not choose to marry her and take care of her relatives. You may think you can get out of doing this, but I know you will not want it made public in the Polecat News how you have tampered with a sweet young girl's affections.

Sincerely yours,

GRANDPA LUSCIOUS.

P. S. I want the two-fifty in cash!

Just as I finish reading, Boo Boo comes out of his faint.

"Hopewell," he says hoarse, "what should I do?"

"Two-fifty smackeroos would be much cheaper than marrying a family like that," I tell him.

"But where at can I get hold of two hundred fifty—" His voice trails off, and his bloodshot eyes fasten very tight on me. "Hopewell, you have not yet paid me the five ringers which you borrowed."

"Five dollars," I say hasty, "is hardly a drop in the bucket when it comes to—"

"And also, yuh could sell yore wife's cow and—"

"Oh, no!" I say no little alarmed. "Not my wife's cow!"

"Hopewell," he says tremulous, "who is it that has give you this very soft job of being deputy for many long years? Who is it that loans you a few ringers now and then for beers and such? I, yore dear friend and pal, Boo Boo Bounce! Also, think what a come-down on the social ladder it would be for you and yore dear wife should you have to go back to punching cows and you could no longer sit in front of a cozy fire in the winter."

"Boo Boo," I groan, "say no more. I will do my utmost—"

"Now," Boo Boo says, smiling, "yuh are talking like a true deputy of Coyote County. Noontime is here and slightly past, so go home and arrange for the sale of said cow. And may I add that should a time come when yuh need any help from me, I shall give my all to be of assistance."

NO little touched by this, although somewhat worried about what my wife will say, I put on my hat and step outside. I take some dozen paces forward before I notice the two Lazy-B horses standing in front of the bank. Then I see two strangers come hurrying from the bank, each carrying a six-gun and a heavy flour sack with their big hats pulled low so you cannot get a good look at their faces.

One of the hombres notices me, lifts his gun and whams a shot in my direction. Instantaneous, I realize that here is Trigger-quick Quincy and his pal and I make myself less noticeable by falling flat on my face.

The owlhooters leap aboard the Lazy-B horses and are gone no-little fast in a great swirl of dust. At that moment, old man Crosby thrusts his head out the bank door and begins to yell bloody murder he has been robbed.

I rush back into the jail office.

"Boo Boo," I pant, "Trigger-quick Quincy has chose the path to the Polecat bank!"

Boo Boo's face turns very pale indeed.

"Deputy," he wheezes, "where at is my six-gun?"

By the time we find his gun, which he had hid in the wastepaper basket, him being somewhat gun-shy, and I get my double-barrel shotgun, there is quite a crowd collected around and about the bank, among which is old man Bundy.

"So," Bundy sneers, "the crime wave in Coyote County was at a end. Wait till you read tomorrow's 'Polecat News.'"

Boo Boo ignores this. "Fellow citizens," he says brave, "get yore hosses and guns and follow me, yore sheriff, and we will capture them desperados, or my name ain't—"

Nobody makes a move to get horses and guns, for it has become whispered about who robbed the bank, and it is common knowledge that Trigger-quick Quincy is not one to trifle with.

"Boo Boo," old man Crosby says icy, "being sheriff, it is up to you, and nobody else, to get the money back."

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Instantaneous, everybody agrees with the old banker.

Boo Boo draws in a quivering breath and shakes the clammy sweat off his three chins.

"Deputy," he says unsteady, "leave us saddle and ride forth."

This we do, and some minutes later, are following the outlaws' trails, which lead into the thick timber around Skunk Creek.

Once out of sight of the citizens of Polecat, we slow our horses to a walk. We come to the old dead tree from which dangles the hornets' nest.

"Be careful, Boo Boo," I warn him. "Should that tree become dislodged, we would be in no little hot water."

We pass the tree no little cautious and presently come to a fork in the trail, one way leading across Skunk Creek, the other going straight ahead.

Boo Boo stops and squints about. "Deputy, I see numerous splashes on yonder bank as if dripping hosses had passed. Leave us cross over and follow the left-hand trail."

We cross over and ride onward. By and by, we come to the open range and there see two sweaty LazyB horses eating grass without saddles and bridles.

"Them," Boo Boo wheezes, "are the two fine hosses stole from old man Beasley, and no mistake!"

"Yes," I agree, "and it is apparent that our desperados have switched to fresh mounts."

Boo Boo's three chins begin to quiver. "Deputy, we have no more chance of catching up with Trigger-quick and his pal on fresh hosses than we have of remaining in office. Leave us return to Polecat, turn in our badges and look for a job punching cows."

Utmostly despondent, and no mistake, we turn about, ride back to the creek, cross over and follow the trail toward home.

We come to a bend in the trail, and I warn, "Don't forget that hornets' nest, Boo Boo."

Then what should we see near the dead tree but Lilly Lou Luscious and her grandpa, him holding the big lunch basket snug on his knees and she pushing his wheelchair along the trail.

Boo Boo is all set to ride elsewhere, but Lilly Lou lifts her golden head and gives him a smile that is no little dazzling.

"Grandpa and I have had the nicest picnic," she says, all of a sudden looking helpless, "but I'm tired from pushing—"

Forgetting he was going elsewhere, Boo Boo slides to the ground and bows gallant.

"Miss Luscious, allow me to help yuh push yore—"

AT that moment, there is a crackle of brush, and who should step up but Chicky-choo Crump, him living not far distant.

"Look what I found caught on a limb in the creek, Boo Boo," he says, holding up a dripping bridle. "Must belong to the Lazy-B outfit. Leastwise, it's marked with the—"

All of a sudden, his nose begins to twitch and his eyes water. Boo Boo and I hold on to our hats, for we know that Chicky-choo is about to give with one of his sneezes. But Lilly Lou and Grandpa Luscious do not realize this, them being unacquainted with Chicky-choo's ways.

Chicky-choo cuts loose. It is like the blast of a ton of dynamite. The dust flies, and our horses jump three feet straight up. Lilly Lou lets out a frightened scream, and Grandpa Luscious tosses the lunch basket one way and the horse blanket another and leaps to his feet. That is when I realize he is no more crippled than I!

Also, I see strapped to his legs twin six-guns, which suddenly leap into his hands; and out of the lunch basket has rolled two heavy flour sacks and numerous odds and ends of clothes, including two black hats. Then I observe that Lilly Lou, too, has a gun in her hand pointed very direct at Boo Boo, who is standing with his mouth open, and then some. Which reminds me that I have not loaded my shotgun.

There is a sudden harsh laugh from Grandpa Luscious as he rips off white whiskers and wig, under which is none other than the ugly face of Trigger-quick Quincy!

"Well, Lilly," he grates, "this looks like the end of our cozy set-up in Polecat. Now there is nothing to do but finish off these three jaspers and get out of the country."

"Yeah," Lilly Lou agrees with a unfunny smile. "But first, tell 'em how we've been foolin' 'em. I'd like this big

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fat love-bird of a sheriff to know what a smart husband I have."

Grinning wicked, and no mistake, Trigger-quick explains how Lilly Lou has gone around Polecat, taking books to people and locating money to steal. Then she fixed herself air-tight alibis, while Trigger-quick, who was supposed to be in bed, a helpless old man, slipped out of Grandma Grinder's house and did the robbing. Also, it was he who stole the horses from the Lazy-B for him and Lilly Lou to use in robbing the bank, Lilly Lou dressing herself like a man for the occasion.

After robbing the bank, they threw the saddles and bridles into the creek and shooed the horses to the other side. Then they returned to where at they were pretending to have a picnic, and Lilly Lou put her dress back on and hid the men's clothes and the black hats in the basket along with the loot.

"What I regret," Trigger-quick says unhappy, "is that I didn't get to collect the two-fifty from this dummy sheriff."

"No use crying over spilled milk," Lilly Lou says brittle. "Let's get the bloody work over."

She lifts her six-gun, thumbs back the hammer business-like and takes careful aim at Boo Boo's bloodless face. But before she can shoot, Boo Boo lets out a deep sigh and passes out cold.

He falls like a ton of bricks against the dead tree. There is a great crash of breaking limbs, and the hornets' nest hits the ground and busts wide open. The next thing I know, we are all splashing in the creek to get away from the hornets. All but Boo Boo, who lays so still on the ground the hornets do not pay him no mind.

At last, I come up for air, and who should come up beside me but Trigger-quick Quincy, sputtering no little. I am utmostly astounded, as well as pleasantly pleased, to see I still have my empty double-barrel in my hands, which I now use vigorous on Trigger-quick's ugly head. As for Lilly Lou, the water and hornets have took all the fight out of her, and Chicky-choo has no trouble of getting her sixgun.

It is the next day, and Boo Boo and I are setting in the jail office, him reading a copy of the "Polecat News," which states truthfully that we captured two vicious desperados and recovered all loot stole in Coyote County.

"Hopewell," Boo Boo says, "leave us remember always that becoming famous is merely the result of choosing the right fork in the path of life. Also, in consideration of yore valuable service to the cause of law and order, I choose to cancel yore debt to me."

"Thank you kindly," I say grateful, knowing how lucky I am to work for a great philosopher such as Boo Boo Bounce, and no mistake. Only this morning my dear wife has give me my ten-dollars allowance, making things very rosy indeed!

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 135

1. Potlatch was a colorful Indian ceremony in which the host gave away all his possessions but one, then the recipients in turn gave similar potlatches until everyone had practically all his own stuff back again.

2. A lookout chair was a high stool in a saloon in which the bouncer of the day sat with shotgun or sixgun and from where he could see out over the heads of the crowd to spot trouble.

3. Bronc riders are supposed to ride with hands holding only the rein. If a rider starts to lose his seat and has to grab at the horn to keep from being thrown, he is "pulling leather."

4. The most famous "Boot Hill" of the West is in Tombstone, Arizona, where a regular Who's Who of notorious outlaws were buried "with their boots on."

5. The Lincoln County war was started by the murder of the Englishman Tunstall, for whom Billy the Kid worked. It was this event, more than any other, which started Billy the Kid on his career as a gunman.

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SAM FORTUNE'S PEACHERINO

By Simpson M. Ritter

The True Story of a Bartender and a Bully!

SAM FORTUNE'S name was a lie or a truism depending on how you looked at such things. His fortune had generally been bad. He had lost two cowpuncher jobs in rapid succession in Arizona; as a clerk in a New Mexico store he had lasted just thirteen days, and as a deputy sheriff in Colorado he had lost his first prisoner twenty minutes after the man had been placed in his custody prior to removal to the county seat.

Now it was 1876 and he was in Wichita Falls, Texas. His capital consisted of four silver dollars, a sickly horse, clothes that wouldn't last much longer and a six gun badly in need of repairs.

He had heard that there was a bartender's job open at the Little Ecco and he meant to try for it. His checkered career had included an unsuccessful episode as a bartender. Perhaps this time he could manage to serve out simple drinks without getting into difficulties. Of course he'd have to make change, and arithmetic had never been one of his strong points.

Sam Gets the Job

Mike Feeley, owner of the Little Ecco, was a big burly fellow who could size a man up fairly well. He decided he'd take a chance on this apparent misfit. Just a hunch. So Sam had a job and a place to sleep.

Since straight drinks were what folks generally wanted things went fairly well. Sam even managed to make change correctly though he was a shade slow and used pad and pencil quite often.

Then Jon Rigley showed up. Rigley was a bully. Folks were glad that Rigley came to town infrequently. He always picked a quarrel and he was bigger than most men. Even Mike Feeley, six foot two and two hundred pounds, feared Rigley.

Rigley walked into the Little Ecco and ordered. Mike served him. Rigley said the whisky, after a taste, was not good. He dashed the remains into Mike's face. Mike leapt over the bar, a small club in his hand, and the two men locked. Rigley wrenched the club from Mike and brought it down on the saloonkeeper's skull. Had Rigley been sober the blow would have hit full on the mark and doubtlessly crushed Mike's head. As it was, it was but a glancing blow that incapacitated the other man.

Call for a Peacherino

Then Rigley noted the new bartender and decided he'd have himself a little fun.

"Gimme a San Francisco Peacherino," he ordered. Even Mike who had been around considerably, and was clinging to the end of the bar nursing his head, looked a bit puzzled at that one.

"New drink?" asked someone.

"Heck, no!" said Jon Rigley. "Folks been drinking it for fifty years. You know how to make a peacherino, bartender?"

"Sure," said Sam, with a side glance at his employer. "You want the Hotel Barclay or the Mermaid's Rest kind?"

Rigley hesitated for a moment. Could it be there actually was such a drink? "The Mermaid's Rest kind," he decided.

"Coming up, sir," said Sam. "One San Francisco Peacherino as made at the Mermaid's Rest." He started mixing. A little of this and a little of that. As he mixed he spoke.

"You've tried this before, Mister. Not many men can drink the Mermaid's Rest kind, Mister. It's a pretty potent drink. They do say one drink turned a preacher into a hell-roaring road agent and that in another case—" He went on to tell a somewhat startling and naughty biography of an octogenarian who had consumed a glass of the stuff.

"Stop your chatter and make the drink," roared Rigley. "I can drink anything any other man can."

(*Concluded on page 160*)

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 6)

that. Ben had no right to raise you for an outlaw. He went his way of his own free will and that was his doing. But no man has a right to say to another, this you must do, this you must be."

Ben Curry had made his pile. He had an organization that was an empire of crime and he wanted out. But there were gunmen who would never let him leave alive. Gunmen like Perrin, poison mean and power crazy; Rigger Molina, white hot but deadly as a rattler, a gunman who was cornered by five men in the stage station of Julesburg and left four of them dead, the fifth wounded! These were the men against whom Ben Curry was calling for help!

Was Mike Bastian being made a catspaw? He did not know. But it wasn't in him to refuse a call for help—at least to look the situation over. And so he went, to meet a destiny he hadn't even suspected until he met Ben Curry's daughter Drusilla. And then, all at once, Mike Bastian's plans were a jig-saw puzzle and a crazy quilt and in a new and bewildering world he had to make new decisions and trust only his keen wits and lightning gun hands!

Brothers, this is a story!

A Walt Coburn Yarn

But don't go 'way. That's not all. In addition to THE TRAIL TO PEACH MEADOW CANYON by Jim Mayo, we've got a smashing second lead in a big novelet by Walt Coburn—SORRY SID'S KETCH DOG. Every western reader knows Coburn and you don't have to be told what he can do with a story, nor about how his stories breathe the real Old West from every pore. Coburn is a cowboy who knows cowboys and he knows every old mossyhorn from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border.

Sorry Sid was a no 'count kid who tended the windmill on the Hourglass ranch and rode the horse pasture fence and packed salt to the salt licks for the cattle. Sid was all hands and feet and Adam's apple and he had only one ambition in life, to be a brush-popper like old Chiz Egan, the tough old whang leather rancher who did a thriving maverick business on the fringes of the Hourglass herds.

But Chiz Egan would have no part of Sorry Sid, nor of Sid's ketch dog, Brin. There was a beast as sorry as his master. Yet the day was to come when Chiz Egan would be mighty glad that Sorry Sid and his hound were there and in the violence of a few climactic moments in a man's life, to learn things about his own hard-shelled old character that even he hadn't suspected. This is a clever story and we got a hunch it comes dang close to being literature because it's as real as the brush and alkali from which it sprung.

And don't go 'way yet.

Meet Lucas and Riley

We've got another novelet coming up—a W. C. Tuttle story by the old master of the Tombstone and Speedy and the Hashknife and Sleepy stories. This story is labeled SPUR A JADED HORSE and it introduces a new team of slightly zany characters, Lonesome Lucas and Spook Riley. There are laughs in this yarn as there are in all Tuttle stories, but this is mostly an action story with a murder mystery angle. Spook Riley is not, and doesn't play dumb. He is a bright young man who is elected sheriff against his will, but goes out to make the most of his job when some mysterious murders hit the range.

SPUR A JADED HORSE has the pace and the dry, crackling wit of every Tuttle story and you'll spend a pleasant reading hour with it.

Wait—don't go yet.

Frederick Bechdolt is represented with another story in his fine historical series. This one is called CASSIDY AND THE WILD BUNCH and it tells the story of that famous and ill-starred bunch that included Harvey Logan, Flat-Nosed George, Bob Kilpatrick, Bee Carver, Harry Lonabaugh and bossed by Butch Cassidy himself.

It's a true story that begins in the old Wild West and ends in South America where Butch Cassidy played out his last hand with an attacking detachment of soldiers. And by that time the automobile had come to Wyoming and the Wild West was giving way to the New West and the day of the big outlaw gangs was over.

The story of Butch Cassidy is a significant one, because it lays bare the curious conditions which made so many good-hearted boys turn outlaw. It's a subject, curiously enough, that is the theme of the novel in this very issue—TALLY THE LONG YEARS, by Bill Hopson. Reading

(Continued on page 158)

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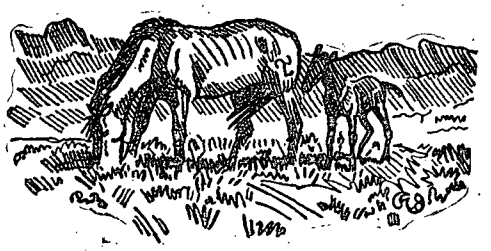

Broncs Not Wanted

How Horses Were Broken

By TEX MUMFORD

THE popular idea that horses were broken by encouraging them to buck until they learned it didn't pay was far from the truth on a well-run ranch. The whole idea in breaking a horse was to keep him from bucking, not to get him into the habit.

A competent horse trainer began gently. He might rope a horse but tried never to throw him. Rather he would let the horse lunge about on the end of the rope, meanwhile playing him as a fisherman plays a trout and bringing him in closer and closer. When the horse was brought within reaching distance he was shown a hackamore. This was eventually put on his head and allowed to remain.

The next step was showing him a saddle and then putting it on his back. The horse objected violently during all this, of course, and the man was often forced to be "firm" but not necessarily brutal. The animal was then allowed to wear saddle and hackamore for a couple of days before a man mounted him. And here again, all effort was designed to keep the horse from bucking.

Of course there were horse-breakers who operated on exactly opposite principles. They got a small sum—sometimes only five dollars for each horse they broke—and their method was to beat the horse into submission as rapidly as possible. This was done by throwing him heavily, beating him with quirts and ropes and generally abusing him until he was in panic of fear at the approach of a man. This was to make him afraid to even dare to buck. Needless to say, such treatment ruined many a horse. It broke the spirit of most, made outlaws and killers of some.

Horses as a general thing, are not too reliable, however, and there is such a thing as too much kindness. Like some people, a horse must understand that there is a firm hand on the rein and that kindness does not necessarily mean weakness. A horse which has been petted by amateurs is apt to turn out to be one of the meanest and most treacherous of all creatures. There ain't no gratitude.

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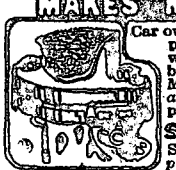

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THE TALLY BOOK

(Continued from page 156)

both of these will make you understand the old days in the West as nothing else.

A Boo-Boo Bounce Tale

Also, we've got a Boo-Boo Bounce story coming up: HOCUS POCUS AND NO MISTAKE, by Ben Frank. Our fat sheriff, who is never satisfied with being the most timid sheriff in the U.S.A., decides to become a magician, probably thinking he would have to be one to catch any outlaws. And so, for the entire story he struggles to perform a trick with a hat and some eggs which usually results—you guessed it—in a lot of omelets. There's a laugh a minute in this new adventure of Boo Boo and his long-suffering deputy, Hopewell.

Well, there's more. But we'll run out of space. So let's just call these the headliners—sort of point in the herd, whilst there's plenty of other good critters making up the sides and drag. There are short stories, features galore and the good old Tally Book.

THE MAIL BAG

FIRST in the mail is an irate letter from a gent with a real gripe.

Mr. Jackson Cole's article on William Cody (It was really a story—Ed.) is to say the least a real western story, if Mr. Cole had not taken Cody's name as the star actor and had picked out any other western handle.

I won't call Cole's attention to the many misinformed statements he makes of this gentleman's career, any more than to say that if Cole had not killed off Sitting Bull so early in his life the Northwest Mounted Police and Col. MacLeod would have had a much easier time settling the Northwest territories of Canada back in the late seventies.

For Mr. Cole's information, and he could get it from any Canadian schoolboy, Sitting Bull, after the Custer fight, took himself and followers, numbering many hundred, into Canada and was not returned to the U.S. by the N.W.M. Police until 1881. From then on Mr. Cole can read U.S. history and hope he will make a better job of his next article.

Sitting Bull was killed in a fight with the Indian Police in 1890.

—N. K. Luxton, Banff, Alberta, Can.

On December 15, 1890, a force of Indian police, led by Lieutenant Bullhead, arrived at Sitting Bull's camp and dragged him from bed to arrest him. By the time they were saddled, they were surrounded by Sitting Bull's warriors.

The first shot seems to have been fired

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by Catch-The-Bear, head of Sitting Bull's bodyguard. He wounded—fatally—Lieutenant Bullhead, but as Bullhead went down, he put a bullet into Sitting Bull. Then Red Tomahawk, of the police, shot Sitting Bull through the head. So ended the long tragedy of Sitting Bull's life, a story which every American might well read—and feel shame at our mistreatment of the American Indian.

Mr. Cole had the time right—about 1890, not prematurely, as Mr. Luxton says, but the details of the killing wrong. Working from Cody's autobiography, he may have confused Sitting Bull with another chief.

As for the other details which Mr. Luxton complains about, but does not enumerate, remember that there were dozens of accounts of these early Frontier events and each one of them differs. So your version depends entirely upon the authority you select. But as to Sitting Bull's death, Mr. Luxton appears to be right and our Mr. Cole wrong and unless he comes up with a very plausible explanation, the wampum goes to Mr. Luxton.

The mistake was caught also by Mr. Glenn A. Preston, of Reed City, Michigan, who wrote about it and in his letter described the fight at Wounded Knee. Mr. Preston served in the old 7th cavalry and knew several men of his troop who had been with Reno in the Little Bighorn battle. So he got much of this old, bloody story first hand. And now comes a letter about a hair-raising subject:

The story of Buffalo Bill mentions that he had yellow hair. When I saw him in 1878 he had black moustaches and goatee and hair. He came to Winsted, Conn., with some Indians. I gave one of them a small coil of brass wire as I was then working in a pin shop. Did Buffalo Bill dye his hair?

—Charles F. Smith, Fairfield, Conn.

Dunno, pardner, dunno. And never met Mr. Cody myself. But all the books say he was light—mebbe not a real blond, but a light brown anyway. If any of our other readers have met Bill Cody, why they're plumb invited to get into the great hair color argument and send us their opinions.

But there's little argument over the basic interest, merit and information in Jackson

[*Turn page*]

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Cole's Buffalo Bill novel, for we're mighty grateful to the dozens of you who wrote in to say how much you liked the yarn. Like, for example:

"The Life and Times of Buffalo Bill" is one of the finest historical novels I have ever read. What I particularly liked was its vivid treatment of episodes of the Frontier, which were told so that they really became alive to the reader. Keep up the good work.

—Anthony Weekman, Santa Barbara, Cal.

Another typical note:

Your April issue of GIANT WESTERN was the best yet. The Buffalo Bill yarn was swell and the fiction was better than ever. Count on me as a steady reader.

—George J. Carvol, Portland, Ore.

Thank you, George, and thanks to all the rest of you who wrote in. And if you want to chime in with YOUR opinion, we'd be mighty happy to receive it, whether it's praise or criticism.

Just write a card or letter and address it to THE RAMROD, GIANT WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Let's hear from you.

—*The Ramrod*

SAM FORTUNE'S PEACHERINO

(*Concluded from page* 155)

"Here's your peacherino, Mister. At the Mermaid's Rest it's a disgrace for a man to order one and not drink it down without once setting the glass down. Drink hearty, sir."

With a saloon full of people looking on Rigley drank without setting the glass down. His face emulated the range of the rainbow but he continued to drink for every time he seemed about to pause he could, over the rim of the glass, see the dozens of intent watchers.

Jon Rigley finished the drink. Then he walked slowly from the saloon, his hand groping for his stomach. In the middle of the street he fell to his knees, then to his face. They took him away and he was bedridden for weeks. He still hell-roared some after his recovery but he never did go near the Little Ecco again.

Sam Fortune's fortune changed. Mike Feeley gave him a raise and Sam kept the job as bartender at the Little Ecco for the next five years. He could have stayed longer but he decided it was time for him to see other parts of the great West.

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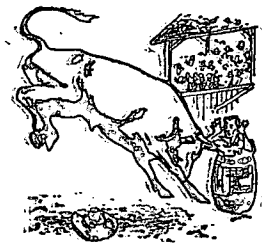
The Rodeo Clown

Laughs and Perils in the Arena!



By BUCK BENSON

ANY list of the world's most dangerous occupations would find that of rodeo clown well up near the top. No insurance company will issue a policy on a rodeo clown's life, which is eloquent testimony enough.

A clown's job in the rodeo arena is not only to be funny. The more serious side and the one which clowns are entirely too modest about, is the job of dashing in and drawing off a maddened bull or bronc from a cowboy who is down, injured or unconscious.

How would you like to hop into an arena, just as a bull is about to make hash of his ex-rider, and thrust yourself between the victim and the horns, your sole protection a pair of baggy pants? That's the kind of job the rodeo clown is called upon to do every day he is working.

If he can toll the animal away, he may duck into the doubtful safety of a small barrel in the arena—doubtful because many a bull has reduced the barrel to sticks and fatally injured the clown.

Rodeo clowns today make a fair salary—such top-notch performers as Jimmy Dickson and Jimmy Nesbitt make better than $12,000 a year—but the money has a strange way of going for doctors and hospital bills. No clown ever takes his own or other cowboys injuries seriously. It is part of the game. A clown will dash into the arena to save a cowboy down with a broken leg from his maddened bronc and in passing, fling at the groaning man, "Smatter kid, stub your toe?"

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TO THE BRAVE

(Concluded from page 144)

of his breath. But he roared like a wounded grizzly as he set upon the Kid. And the Kid, with the light of battle now flaring in his eyes, was a Kid the delighted cowpunchers had never seen before.

He was as magnificent as a lion as he stalked the bigger man and slashed him to ribbons with fists like axes. He beat Pearson down, let him rise and beat him down again, four times before the battered hulk of a man mumbled that he'd had enough and would not rise again.

The Kid put one foot on Pearson's chest. He spoke to him like a school teacher.

"I want you to know what happened, Mat." he said. "There never was a day that I was afraid of you. I didn't think you was so dumb that you thought my being polite meant that. I was trying to be decent, that's all. I didn't know there were people in the world you can't be decent to. I didn't know there were people who didn't want to be friends with others—but just wanted to fight everybody, or boss everybody. So I had to deal with you on your own terms. I'm a little ashamed, Mat. But we've both learned something."

"Don't be ashamed, Kid," said Abe Douglas, taking his arm. "You've learned something and so have all of us today. 'Specially Pearson. You'll find you've got more friends here than you ever thought."

THE second conversation between Abe Douglas and Old Man Barber, the Kid did not overhear.

"I see Pearson's quit," the old man said. "Thought he would after that fight. How come he didn't shoot the Kid? He had time when the Kid was galloping down on him, didn't he?"

"Sure did," Douglas agreed. "But you see, I didn't want to see anything like that happen, so I took the trouble to unload his gun while it was hanging on the wall that day."

"I see," said Old Man Barber, scratching his head.

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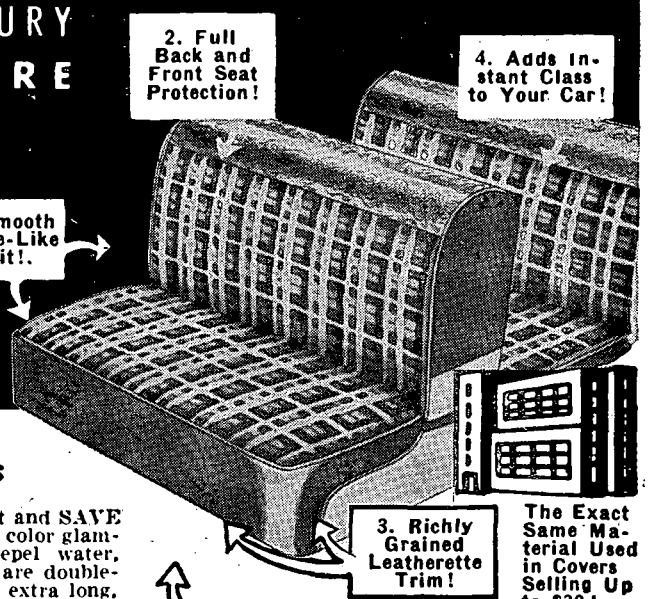
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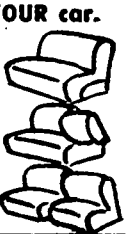

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